

Back and Forth Responsibility

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As a mother of three, including two teenagers, I've come to realize that the whole concept of "responsibility" for young people is simply part of growing up, and it's an uneven, back-and-forth process. Each year parents give their kids more and more room to take responsibility: for their studies, for what they wear, for how they spend their time, and for how late they stay up, and how late they sleep. It's exciting, but it's also a bit overwhelming because teenagers seesaw back-and-forth between childhood and adulthood for many years. And then one day, you look up and they are totally grown.

Watching out for one's health and the health of others is just another aspect of growing up and becoming responsible. But it may be the most complicated one. As teens, you have all kinds of impulses: to do what others are doing, to fit in, to seem cool and mature — even when it means doing stuff that isn't really in your best interest. These impulses definitely include having sex before you're really ready whether physically or emotionally. So you have to be responsible for protecting yourself — or your girlfriend or boyfriend — from getting into circumstances that can lead to unhealthy situations.

A recent online survey of young people asked what they were most concerned about related to their health and wellness. Three

of the top four concerns were contracting a sexually transmitted infection, having or causing an unplanned pregnancy, and becoming involved in an unhealthy relationship. While the solution for young people may not always be defined as being more “responsible,” it’s clear that the concerns we have as parents are shared by our kids.

I believe that responsibility for sexual health is a two-way street. It is both in the teaching and in the taking. As parents we hope and expect that our kids will take responsibility for having healthy relationships, for waiting to become sexually active until they feel they are ready, and for using birth control and condoms to prevent unintended pregnancy and to keep from getting or spreading an STI. But that means we parents have responsibility, too — for talking to them openly about sex and taking the shame, stigma, and confusion away from something that is a natural and healthy part of life. We also have to take responsibility for insisting that our public officials support policies that provide young people with age-appropriate sexual health information and education. We have to take responsibility for supporting open, honest conversations about sex, sexuality, and sexual health from our living rooms to our churches, temples, and mosques, and in our schools.

Young people are looking for our support as parents, teachers, adult friends, and role models. And, even when everyone is teaching and preaching responsibility, our kids make mistakes — and, frankly, so do we. If we do our jobs as parents and adults, then we can hope that our kids, or any kid, can turn to us when they need help, when they are in crisis, or simply when they are struggling to sort through their sexual health concerns and relationships. In the end, the most important responsibility is our responsibility for each other.

Cecile Richards is president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) and the Planned Parenthood Action Fund. Over the course of her career, she has become a nationally recognized progressive leader and a fierce advocate for reproductive health and rights. Before joining Planned Parenthood, Ms. Richards served as deputy chief of staff for Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi and played a key role in her election as the Democratic Leader in the House of Representatives.