TuSalud

How to Talk to Your Children About Sex

Half of Latinas will be pregnant by the age of 20, the highest rate of any ethnic group in the U.S. What can parents do about it?

December 1, 2007 By Diane Pagen

Gloria became pregnant at 17 by a man she was dating from the neighborhood. Her mother was unaware that her daughter was even dating, much less having sex. Most painful to Gloria was that the father, with whom she was so in love, insisted she get an abortion. When she refused, he disappeared. Gloria had the baby, and life certainly changed. She was able to finish high school, but with a son to care for, she had to put off going to college for years. “Gloria was doing so well in school that I didn’t think I needed to talk to her about sex,” her mother says. “I wouldn’t have known what to say anyway. No one ever said anything to me except that I should wait until I got married.”

The teen pregnancy rate (ages 15–19) in the United States is 75.4 pregnancies per 1,000 girls. It has been steadily declining for years, according to a recent study by the Guttmacher Institute, thanks to the increased use and availability of contraceptives. The rate at which Hispanic teens become pregnant is declining as well, though more slowly than rates for other ethnic groups—and at 131.5 pregnancies per 1,000 girls, the rate is 57 percent higher than the general teen population’s.

When it comes to talking to kids about sex, “parents are often not knowledgeable, since they received no instruction when they were young,” says Roberta Arrigo, PhD, a developmental psychologist in New York. “It takes effort to keep from making the same mistakes regarding sex in the next generation.” The good news, Dr. Arrigo says, is that “in every developing country, sex education has been shown to reduce teen pregnancy significantly.”

When parents make things worse

What can parents do to reduce the odds their own children will father a child or get pregnant before they’re ready? Advocates of teen-pregnancy prevention usually list three typical strategies: 1) encourage teens to delay sex; 2) teach them about using condoms and other contraception every time if they decide to have sex; and 3) emphasize the enormous hardship likely to come from having a child when a parent is young and alone. The third “doom-and-gloom” message can backfire, experts say. Alone, it doesn’t give teens ways to deal with potentially sexual situations. Nor does it address the confusion caused by the media’s constant barrage of sexual imagery. How

can teens make sense of the media's encouraging sex while their parents say that the product of sex—children—will ruin their lives?

That message also conflicts with culture: Hispanic youth are taught to value children. Once pregnant, young Latinas terminate their pregnancies less often than girls of other ethnicities—of every 100 pregnancies among Hispanic girls, only 25 are aborted (compared with 31 abortions for every 100 pregnancies among white, non-Hispanic teens). Hispanics value children even when they're born under far-from-ideal circumstances. In a survey by Childtrends, only 46 percent of female Hispanic teens said they would be "very upset" if they became pregnant, as compared with 60 percent of girls across ethnicities. Clearly, teens have their values, and if we are to help them we cannot ignore their beliefs.

What must parents do to help?

Arrigo suggests a simple plan that includes the following: Start talking about sex early, and don't wait until your child becomes a teen. "Teenagers are not always listening when you talk to them about sex (or anything else!)" she says. "You must begin in the early years when they first ask, 'Where do babies come from?'" If you respond with simple, direct answers, you lay a good foundation for later, more-detailed discussion without embarrassment.

Be honest with yourself about your own ability to talk about sex. If you feel too uncomfortable to discuss the topic with your children, enlist a pediatrician or a public health nurse—either will offer information in a nonjudgmental manner. There are also community-based organizations that specialize in educating teenagers and families about sexual health and decision making.

Spend time with your teen. The world we live in is making this harder to do. But the connectedness needed to build trust and honesty can only come from time spent together and having conversations. "Try to create rituals such as certain nights a week for a sit-down dinner," Arrigo says.

Encourage positive behavior and long-term goals in both male and female children. Show your teens that there are plenty of ways to feel good about themselves. "The more talents they work on, and the more activities they have, the less likely they will rush into premature sex or take sex lightly," Arrigo says. If you don't impress the importance of long-term goals early in their life, children can develop a short-term mindset, which can have disastrous consequences when it comes to making decisions about sex. "All cultures tend to place the burdens of sex on the female," says Arrigo, "while males are encouraged to 'experiment.'" Arrigo adds, "We need to include teen boys in taking responsibility, so that they make better choices as teens and also as adults.

TIPS FOR TALKING ABOUT SEX

Child development experts at the University of California San Francisco and Roberta Arrigo, PhD, advise parents:

1. Use proper anatomical words to describe body parts.
2. Before answering a question, ask your child or teen to tell you how much they already know (this will help you to answer the question without confusing them).
3. Seize everyday opportunities to discuss sex, such as when a sexual situation arises in a television show or movie you are watching together.
4. Don’t wait until your kids reach their teen years to start discussing sex. Many kids have questions or find themselves in sexual situations prior to ninth grade. (Child psychologists say it’s OK to name body parts as early as 3, and explain “how babies are made” as early as age 6.)
5. Find out about the sex education curriculum at your children’s school. If the content seems unhelpful, talk to school administrators about adding to it.
6. Give your kid a lot of practice making decisions while they are young—which of two shirts to wear to school, or how they would like to spend their allowance. Making even small decisions helps them practice for making important decisions about sex.

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