

Teenage Sexuality: Parents' Fears Confronted

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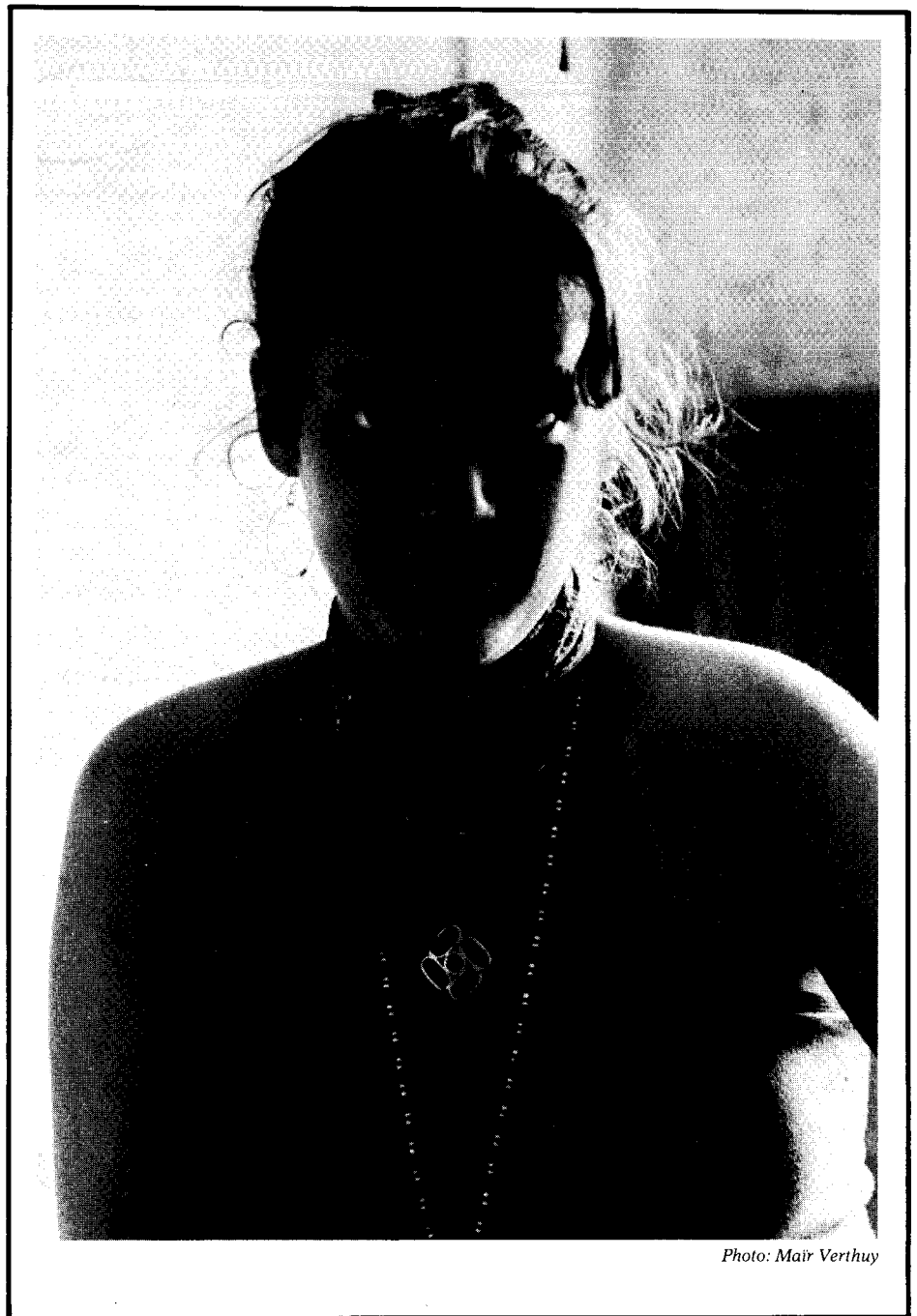


Photo: Mair Verthuy

Cet article s'intéresse à la peur des parents en ce qui concerne la sexualité de leur fille. L'auteure dit que les adolescentes sont mûres sexuellement mais parce que les parents n'offrent pas assez de soutien et ne donnent pas assez de renseignements le nombre de grossesses chez les adolescentes augmente de jour en jour. Il en résulte, ce qui peut surprendre, une amitié renforcée entre mère et fille. Malheur-

usement, cette amitié peut coûter cher.

Il est temps d'enseigner aux adolescents ce qu'impliquent les relations sexuelles car de nos jours, le mythe du jeune homme qui abandonne sa petite amie lorsqu'elle est enceinte n'existe plus.

As adults, we have come to accept

many changes in today's society and, while we may not like all the changes, we can do little but accept them. Divorce has lost most of its stigma; living together (either before marriage or with no intention of ever getting married), common-law relationships, "open marriage," pre-marital sex, and even abortion, all are fairly commonplace. But, as adults and

especially as parents, we still give the old "knee-jerk" response to the idea of adolescent sexual activity. We find it difficult to accept the fact that our children are sexual human beings who are growing up in a society where sex is used to sell everything. We expect them not to be curious about sex, to experiment with acceptable necking and petting but to save "it" for marriage. We find it difficult to accept their examining our values and even rejecting some of them, including virginity. They are growing up sexual, just as we did, but they are more blatant about the fact.

What we, as parents, have difficulty acknowledging is that they are saying and doing some of the things that we as teens just fantasized about or dabbled in. But we were very covert about our feelings. Today, teens are involved in sexual activity at an earlier age and more frequently than we ever were.

There are, of course, dangers and risks involved in early sexual activity. I too wish that teens would just wait till "they were ready for it." The problem is: will they ever be ready in our eyes? Does marriage make them ready? Most teens whom I counsel feel that they are ready; they have made sexual activity a conscious decision. We cannot change their decision by lecturing, preaching and warning, grounding them, or refusing to allow them to see their lovers. Keeping them ignorant of "the facts of life" will not work either. Then they will get into trouble.

If we can acknowledge that our children are sexual human beings, that they are probably going to experiment with sex, that we are obligated to provide our children with some sense of our values and with basic sex education and to encourage them to behave in a mature and responsible manner, then we have done all we can do to help them grow up sexually.

As parents, we have four major fears for our teens and these are the same fears that our parents had for us. Our biggest fear is of unplanned teenage pregnancy, not groundless. At present, the pregnancy rate is declining in all age brackets except among teens, where it is rising



Photo: Mair Verthuy

dramatically. Unplanned pregnancy at any age can certainly complicate things, but for a teenager it can be devastating. We know it; they know it. But we have not given them psychological permission to protect themselves from unplanned pregnancy. We have not been able to say, "Look, if you are going to need birth control, please, just go and get it." Easy for us to say, but so difficult for us to do, because we still feel that if we are not saying "no, no, no," then we must be saying "yes." This is not the case. We are simply telling them that if they are adult enough to be involved sexually, then they must be adult enough to prevent unwanted pregnancy.

Unplanned pregnancies do occur. Teens who have never had sexual intercourse come into our clinic pregnant. Through "heavy petting" or nude genital petting or the boy's

ejaculation outside the girl's body but in the vicinity of her genitals, conception took place. Imagine a girl saying, "Guess what, Mom? I'm pregnant, but don't worry, I'm still a virgin."

The secret is in assisting our kids in understanding courtship. If they are going to be involved in heavy necking and petting, then they had better be thinking about effective contraception and get it *now*, talk it over with their partner, make some decisions. Unfortunately, they want their first sexual experiences to be spontaneous. "It just happened." They got carried away by the heat of passion. They do not want it to appear premeditated. But there is nothing scarier than that first missed period and they need to know that.

In our clinic, many teenagers are

simply devastated if a pregnancy test is positive. During counselling, we explore and discuss all of the options but most of the teens opt for therapeutic abortions, although any surgical procedure carries some risk and there are long-term psychological effects that may recur. On the whole, teens come out of the experience with a new awareness of themselves, wiser, more mature, more confident in and more responsible for themselves. They have learned and are ready to get on with living.

If a young woman under sixteen years of age wishes to have a therapeutic abortion, she must have parental consent; some over sixteen elect to inform their parents. Usually their initial reaction is one of disappointment, hurt, and anger, but they will definitely support their daughters. After it is all over, most teens will say that they are closer to their mothers than they ever were before. "My mom and I have become good friends; I can tell her anything." What has happened is that Mother is not longer treating Daughter as a child with Mother coming on as "Critical Parent." They now have an "adult-to-adult" relationship. Abortion is one very drastic way for a mother to develop a good relationship with her daughter; the friendship is one of the most positive outcomes of an unplanned pregnancy. If we had had an adult relationship with our daughters in the first place, then we might possibly have avoided the unplanned pregnancy.

Let us not forget the boys in this situation. My experience with boys when we announce a positive pregnancy test is that they are just as devastated as the girls. They do not walk away, "slam, bam, thank you, Ma'am." They are unbelieving, shocked, stunned, and terrified, but they do not abandon the girls. They are generally suffering through it all too. "Why did I do it?" — "Why didn't I just use a rubber?" — "Fool, fool, fool."

If they have to hurry to Buffalo for an abortion, to the tune of \$250.00, it is usually the boy who scrapes up the money from his brother or his buddies or even from selling his car. That is called

"instant maturity."

Another of our adult fears is of V.D., now commonly called sexually transmitted diseases (S.T.D.). Syphilis and gonorrhea are a major concern because females may not develop any signs or symptoms, can have them without knowing, unless they transmit them to caring partners who advise them to seek treatment immediately. In our clinic, we also see venereal warts, which affect both sexes and are stubborn to treat. Crabs may be sexually transmitted but can come from wearing others' jeans, from using unaired sleeping bags, from staying in youth hostels, very occasionally from sitting on toilet seats and from trying jeans on in a store. However, they will very quickly make their presence felt and treatment is easy and effective.

But herpes, once we get it, we get it for life. There is absolutely no treatment or cure at present. It flares up repeatedly under stress and, because of infections, it is a very real threat to normal delivery of a baby. We do not get it from door knobs and toilet seats: we get it from sexual contact with an infected partner and teenagers need to know that.

Consequently, we must emphasize the necessity of having a committed, concerned, involved, and stable relationship with one partner to reduce the risks of sexually transmitted diseases. We are talking about committed relationships, yet we defeat our own purposes when we tell our children "not to go steady." If they are going to be sexually active, then better it be in a stable, committed relationship. If we tell them, "date a lot of different guys," we may not be doing them a favour.

Our next big fear is that a girl will "ruin her reputation" if she is known to be sexually active. From my many workshops and rap sessions with teens in the Toronto area, the consensus is that, if a girl has a steady boyfriend for several months, it is generally assumed that they are sexually active and that is acceptable to peers. If she breaks up with him, there is a brief mourning period; then it is all right to start going with another boy and after a

time be sexually involved with him, a form of "serial monogamy." When she dates more than one boy at a time and there is any suspicion of sexual activity with any or all of them, then she gets a reputation as a "slut" that is very difficult to lose.

For males, the old "macho" image is dying and boys no longer like to project the image of being "fast" or "getting around a lot." Sensitive, thoughtful males reject the "stud mentality" and most females are reluctant to be identified as "another of his easy conquests."

One fear that we as parents are most reluctant to admit to is the fear that our daughter's behaviour might ruin *our* reputation in our community or among our peers. We might be seen as failures in our role as parent if our teenage daughter is rumoured to be pregnant. "What will the neighbours think?" is still a powerful influence in our lives, whether we like it or not.

Our last big fear is that "she might get hurt," that she might be somehow "traumatized, hurt, or emotionally damaged" by some uncaring male who will leave her feeling guilty, dirty, used, or ashamed after the relationship ends. This is a possibility. But she can also be traumatized by failing her driving licence, by the scourge of acne, by not being popular with the gang, or by not winning the swim-team championship. She will survive and possibly learn a great deal. This is not the exclusive domain of adolescents. Many adults are "hurt" in relationships. Age does not provide immunity from emotional scars, but most of us have learned that they are not terminal and we have gained from our experiences, good and bad. If they are fortunate, teens will have loving parents to help them through, if not good friends, supportive teachers, and counsellors. Most emerge to try again — "older and wiser."

Now that we have identified our fears, perhaps we can do something so that we are not immobilized by them. One area that most of us as parents could improve upon is communication with our children. This takes a little research, reading, and practising, but it works and takes

some of the stress out of living with teens. We can share our values with them and encourage them to clarify their values with us without fear of being put down or of reprisal. We must ensure that they have some good basic knowledge of sex and sexuality, so that they are not "in the dark" about sexual arousal, sexual response, and contraception.

Most of us "hope" that such education is happening in schools. In some schools, it is on the curriculum, but not generally. In some schools, even if it is on the curriculum, it may not be taught because of the principal's reluctance to get involved in controversial topics or to cause discomfort to the teachers covering the subject.

Even if it is taught, there will be many of the same old questions that we had when we were teenagers. Does a boy really feel insecure if he is going to have sex and he is still a virgin? What happens if he "comes" too soon? Such questions have plagued every male since Adam. Girls have many of the same concerns. "When a guy touches my hand, I get really sort of mushy and strange feelings go through me. What is this and why is it happening? Is this called being horny?" It is difficult to describe sexual arousal to females. I refer to it as "butterfly belly," or "randy" seems to describe it perfectly. Males know when they are sexually aroused. But females have to be made aware of their body responses so that they become aware that they are "turned on" and must make some decision pretty fast. If they have no intention of sexual activity, they must call a halt quickly. If they decide to continue, then they must protect themselves against pregnancy.

A rap session in a large senior high school will elicit numerous questions, written anonymously on little scraps of paper and dropped into a "Dear Sue" box to be answered during an open lunch period. The questions cover basic sexual functioning, anatomy and physiology, birth control, pregnancy, childbirth, rape, S.T.D., homosexuality, abortion, relationships, feminine hygiene, and masturbation. The questions do not



Photo: Bev Pearl

change much but demand answers so that both males and females understand sexual responses and have an opportunity to discuss caring relationships.

I certainly would not advocate early or indiscriminate sexual activity among teens, but I am not wringing my hands in despair over

"what this younger generation is coming to." Given the opportunity to behave in a mature and responsible way, given good basic background information, given hassle-free access to contraception and permission to use it if needed, teens will develop into healthier and happier adults.