

## "The Talk"

### How Planned Parenthood Can Help Parents

Clare Coleman, President & CEO

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More information about Planned Parenthood's resources for parents can be found at [www.ppmhv.org](http://www.ppmhv.org).



En route to celebrating Mother's Day with my family, I heard a writer, Meredith Hall, talking on National Public Radio about her memoir, *Without a Map*. It's the story of her life, and the dislocation triggered by an unplanned pregnancy at 16.

Hall's mother told her she had to leave home because of the pregnancy, and while she was taken into her father's home, he and her stepmother kept her out of sight until the baby was born and given up for adoption. Hall described how her mother's rejection and her father's shame launched her journey alone through life.

That story resonated with me because a number of women in their 30s, 40s and 50s have told me recently about the warnings that they received as teenagers about getting pregnant. Yesterday's parents said:

*"Don't come home."*

*"Don't you dare disgrace our family."*

*"Jump off the Mid-Hudson Bridge."*

*"Your father and I would kill you."*

The sting of these statements, and the message that they send, is evident years later; these women could recall perfectly what they were told. I would like to think that the world has changed, that parents today recognize that there are more appropriate and more loving ways to express their hopes and values for their kids, but I think it's a very difficult and emotional challenge.

As I talk with parents in many different communities, I have been struck by how many have told me that they are not talking with their kids about sex and sexuality. Today's parents say:

*"My son doesn't want me to bring it up."*

*"I tried once and he left the room."*

*"She won't talk to me. She says, 'Mom, stop it!'"*

*"Are you kidding me? I can't do that."*

[continued]

These are parents who are interested enough in Planned Parenthood's work and mission that they volunteer, attend events, or donate funds, and yet they aren't having "the talk."

In fact, our staff is often surprised to hear from their own friends or neighbors of their reluctance and even fear of having "the talk" – it seems even the best intentioned, most involved parents face significant hurdles when it comes to educating their children about sexuality and infusing that education with their own values and perspective.

Helping parents get over their own hurdles is so important, because having clear and accurate information about sexuality, risk-taking and disease has become a public safety issue for young people. Just as you would talk with your child about alcohol, drug use or being safe at a shopping center, it's critically important that you talk with your kids about sex.



*Kyra Power and her mom, Joan Tarasevich, at a recent parent-child workshop*

That's why Planned Parenthood is launching a "peer education" initiative for parents, called Sexuality Awareness for Everyone (SAFE).

SAFE is intended to help parents with essential information and current research on sexuality, the experience of young people today, and the kinds of questions and concerns we're hearing in our programs and health centers. It is also intended to create a good, candid environment in which parents can talk with each other about how they have approached the challenge of talking with their children about sexuality.

Sharing the latest research and our real-life experience with young people, while allowing the parents to talk with other parents, will not only help those families but we hope it will help create a community environment in which our parent "peer educators" can help all parents find their way through these important conversations, even when it may be uncomfortable.

Together, we can create a community in which tomorrow's parents will say:

*"We can talk about sex anytime you need to – I'm here for you."*

*"It's important for us to talk, even when it feels embarrassing."*

*"We love you no matter what."*

*"You'll always be safe when you talk to your mom and me."*

I hope you'll participate as we work at putting the "parents" back in "Planned Parenthood." Thanks for your support, and don't hesitate to be in touch with your own views or experiences.

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