

Talking With Your Kids About Sexuality

Planned Parenthood[®]
of Northern New England

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Teens Talk

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“Don’t keep quiet and let TV, movies and the internet become the only teachers your kids have about sex and sexuality.”
—David Walsh

Teens Talk

Why Listen To Teens?

by Catriona McHardy, Vice-President of Education and Training

Understanding what is going on in a child's life becomes complicated and often challenging during adolescence. Parents of teens are constantly wondering and worrying about what is truly happening for this young yet maturing teenager in their family. It is imperative and instinctual for parents to want to keep their children safe from physical, emotional and sexual harm. Parents of teens are especially focused on finding ways to keep their teen's life as "risk free" as possible. And this desire becomes more precarious as a teen develops and has more and more experiences that involve risk.

At a time when teens want privacy and autonomy, parents want connectedness and honest details ... and sometimes even confessions.

It is a parent's job to study adolescents; to know when to engage in a dialogue about life, when to let a stinging remark go, when to set limitations and when to loosen them, when to be concerned about withdrawal and when not to, when to give advice, when to take

advice and when to just “love them up.” Undoubtedly it is a hard job and undoubtedly it has great rewards.

PPNNE has been working with teens and parents for years. We understand the dilemmas as well, and the love that exists between parents and teens. We are dedicated to giving support to teens and to parents in as many ways as possible. Our belief and research show us that teens want to talk to a trusted adult about their lives, and most often that adult is their parent. And parents want to be available to their teens. They are looking for help to start and keep good conversations

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Fact:

Teens report that parents MOST influence their decisions about sex. Adults, however, believe that friends—not parents—most influence their decisions.

—National Campaign To Prevent Teen Pregnancy. 2004. Parent Power: What Parents Need to Know and Do to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

The Balancing Act...To Tell Or Not To Tell

by Colleen, Maine

Question: Looking back on high school, what advice could you give to parents about teen sexuality?

Answer: Please be as open and honest about your own experiences as you can. So many milestones in high school pass more easily when parents share what they remember about their own time. In my house, interviewing for my first job, learning to drive, and now applying to college, were all stressful events my parents helped me through by offering their perspective. Advice was never as simple as “do this because I said so;” for that response was outdated as soon as I had learned when to be obedient and when it was appropriate to reason for myself.

When it came to first relationships however, communication broke down, to use a cliché. My parents were very comfortable with using anatomical words and talking about teen reality *abstractly*; they were uncomfortable in talking with me about *my reality*...even before I had one, so to speak.

In seventh grade I brought a coed group of friends, just friends, home for an afternoon snack while both my parents were at work. Later that evening, mom confronted me about my poor judgment. “What could I tell the other parents,” she asked me,

“if there had been some sort of fire while those boys were here?” We both knew gender had nothing to do with fire safety, and when I looked at her strangely she said firmly, “There will be no boys in this house when I am not home.”

“Teens are less likely to use contraception if their parents don't know and they're trying to avoid their parents knowing about it, because if you have your parents' support, it's so much easier. I think everyone needs at least one person, an adult, that they can trust, that they can go to for help.”

—PPNNE Teen Council Member,
Burlington, VT

“What does she think we were doing?” I joked with my friends. But really, I knew what she thought we were doing. In my mind, if my parents assumed I was being sexual with boys, I must have reached an age where it is natural to be sexual with boys. I definitely had those urges, and I already knew the spoken policy of “wait until marriage” was a joke because my parents aren’t even married.

Years later, when I was almost 17, I had decided I was ready to have sex. I wanted to be on birth control pills, and although I knew I could do it independently, I followed the recommendation: “Try to talk to

your parents first!” I used commercials as conversation starters and when that proved awkward I moved to the classic, *I have a friend...* I followed my parents’ example of innuendo; “*I hear it clears up acne... I hear it regulates your period... Laura is on it because her mom thinks she's having sex...*” I listed every reason I could without outright telling my mom I was going to have sex. She was as stubborn as she could be; “*I don't believe you should be using drugs you don't need just because everyone else is. No.*”

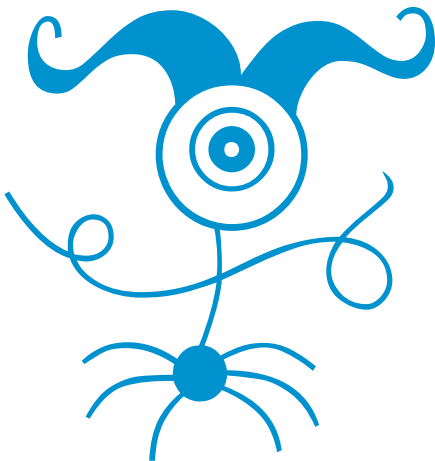
I knew I was emotionally ready, and that I had to be on the pill to be physically ready. So I went to my local Planned Parenthood. Doing it myself felt lonely, but empowering. Getting on the pill, I found out, was an excellent choice for me, birth control aside. My periods had always been long, heavy, and miserable. Mom said I should eat right, exercise regularly, and hope to outgrow it. The gynecologist said that although that was sound advice in most cases, I was already too old to hope to outgrow it. And anatomically, I’m prone to these symptoms. The women in my family probably have similar problems she predicted. “Not that they would tell me,” I thought.

Although making the decision to have sex and get on the pill myself, without guidance from my parents, was empowering, I feel farther from my mom. There is a whole part of

my life I enjoy and am proud of that she knows nothing about. It isn't that I want to gossip with my mom about sex; I wouldn't be comfortable with that either. But I credit my ability to reason and make good choices to her, and I'd like to share with her why I've made these two. I'd like to know about her experiences as a woman, good and bad. I'd like to learn from them, just as I learned interviewing and applying to college through the stories she told me about her time doing both. Our inability to talk personally about relationships and sex has divided us more than anything else. I advise other parents who are uncomfortable talking personally about relationships and sex to try, because a failure to communicate on any topic is distancing. ☑

Insights: What Does This Mean?

- ☞ Teens ask us to share our own teenage experiences. Why is it difficult for us to do that? **Find ways to share your teen experiences.**
- ☞ In relationship discussions, it's up to you to set the parameters. **If you're looking for information that will relieve your anxieties, ask questions—but not too many, all at once.** Give information that you think is important.
- ☞ Honor teens' knowledge about their own emotions and what they know about sexuality and sexual health.
- ☞ Find ways to begin conversations about your sons' and daughters' relationships. **If you don't succeed the first time, don't give up.**
- ☞ If the conversation is hard, say so and say why. **Expose some of your fears and a little of your vulnerability.**
- ☞ Offer to help your teen get reproductive health care. Give suggestions and offer to go with her or him.
- ☞ Encourage your teen to accompany his or her partner to a reproductive health center.
- ☞ Ask about the visit once it's over.



Why Listen To Teens

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alive, and to give their teen exactly what she/he needs. Knowing that conversations and communication are imperative is the easy part—knowing how to do it is quite different.

We know that teen lives can be mysterious and misunderstood and that parents need to know what is really going on, what teen reality is like today. Understanding teens and their lives is the first step towards connecting and having great conversations with them.

This issue of GULP! is written by teens—and it is written for parents and other caring adults. It gives us a glimpse into the thoughts, dilemmas, and issues teens face today. It might give you the inspiration or material for starting an ongoing conversation with a teen in your life.

Dialogue: it's like opening a door. ☑

“Teens are not all about drugs and sex. We look for relationships that work and people to have fun with. We may make mistakes, but it is important that you support us instead of being upset. We know when we mess up and will work to fix it.”

—PPNNE Teen Council Member

Having a Gay Brother

by Claire, Vermont

When my brother, Elliott, came out of the closet, it wasn't as much of a surprise as you might imagine. I guess you could say I've known my entire life, just by noticing the differences between him and other boys his age. He wasn't particularly interested in sports, videogames, and other "boy" things. He was more interested in drama and playing with me, his younger sister. Elliott's favorite "games" included playing with my hair, (which I didn't really like!), dressing up and dancing with me. By the time he was 16, it was truly obvious that he wasn't like most of the other boys in his grade, so that when he came out, my whole family sort of knew it was coming.

I was the first person in our family Elliott told. It was a bit awkward at first, but fortunately the rest of the family handled it quite well and adapted easily to the "new Elliott." In fact, he had so much support from our family, that it was fairly easy for him and everyone else to adapt quickly. I think Elliott's announcement would have been much harder and unacceptable in other societies or areas of this country. Vermont is so so liberal, and people here tend to accept and embrace differences in people, unlike many other communities. Elliott finding, and being accepted for, his sexual orientation was one of the best things that's ever happened to him because it made him be clear about who he is and who he can become. He is secure in his body,


which is something that a lot of people have trouble conquering. He is confident and comfortable, because he is surrounded by people who love him for who he is and don't judge him for this sexual orientation.

Personally, I have a few challenges having a gay brother, the biggest being having to deal with people using the terms "gay" and "faggot" in derogatory ways. It seems as if these slang words are being used more frequently by people of all ages. I feel offended when people use these terms, and I try to make them aware of how hurtful these words can be. Another challenge that Elliott faced was really figuring out who he was. He had times where he was irresponsible and didn't make good choices while he was trying to figure out where he "fit in." Now that he's done so, he is a stronger, more confident person.


Of course, as siblings, Elliott and I have our ups and downs together, but he's my brother and I love him... period. In fact, Elliott being homosexual has helped me expand my horizons and made me more open to different ideas and groups of people that I might have otherwise been. For instance, I became close to one of his friends who is transgender, a person I might not have otherwise gotten to know. Also, I've gotten along really well with most of his dates and his partner, Ben, is like a brother to me. We tend to judge people based on how they look on the outside, and


Support your teens more than ever if they are questioning their sexual orientation.


we don't always look at what else is there. Now, thanks in part to my brother, I have learned to grasp new ideas and become my own person.


Elliott moved out to San Francisco this year and so far, it's been one of the best experiences of his life. He's so comfortable out there, just like he was here, but the big city life and gay culture are giving him even more opportunities to become the person he wants to be. What Elliott's done and who he's become makes me admire him and helps make me a much more grounded and strong person. Thanks, Eli! 

Insights: What Does This Mean?

 **It is critically important to let your teen know how much you love them as people, whatever their sexual orientation may be - but especially if they tell you they are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The most important thing they could hear is "I love you and I will always love you" and better yet "I love you and I will always support who you are."**

 **Treat your lesbian, gay or bisexual teen like a teenager.** Things like crushes, dating, romance and heartbreak look and feel very similar among gay and straight teens, and they all deserve our empathy, caring and support.

 **Teens who are questioning their sexual orientation are more prone to depression, drug and alcohol use and abuse, and sometimes suicide. Often their difficulty comes not only from trying to live in a misinformed culture but from fears of rejection by their family.**

 **Helping gay teens find the right resources—counselors, media, organizations, and role models—gives them the message that **you are there for them.****

Friendships

by Katelyn, Vermont

Friends Forever, “Best Friends,” and “BFF.” How many times have we all seen or heard these phrases? Be it from a friend's mouth, in a magazine, or on a keychain, we've all witnessed these proclamations of undying friendship. But are they real? Is that little second grade girl really going to be best friends with her next-door neighbor for all eternity?

The answer is, probably not. I'm not saying that you can't be friends with people that you've known since you were young, but it's quite rare that your "best friend" stays the same for the rest of your life. In a lot of cases, this is probably a good thing. As we get older, we really do grow apart from people whom we used to be close to in our childhoods. The majority of this stems from the fact that most childhood friends are formed out of proximity. As a kid, you don't have many interests that aren't shared by the masses, so in general you end up befriending the kids who are in your class or neighborhood. The problem that arises from these friendships is that when you get older, you start to develop interests that are more specialized, and often your original "best friend" doesn't share these interests.

One thing to make sure that you remember when it comes to friendships is that even if you have new and different interests, you can still be friends. You don't have to

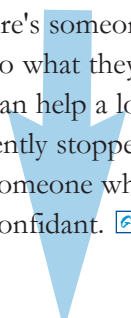
“[I want my friends to] Respect the choices I'm making and offer me your support - not your judgment. We all need positive encouragement from our friends.”

—National Campaign To Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002. *Not Just Another Thing to Do: Teens Tell Us About Sex, Regret, and the Influence of Their Parents.*

continue to be each other's most trusted confidant, but if you can remain civil towards each other, you'll always have that one person who remembers what you were like when you were a kid. This may sound like something that an adult would say, but I'm a high school sophomore, and I recognize how it's really nice to have those people in your life. You may even find out later in your lives that you still have a lot of things in common!

Who knows?

One thing that must be remembered is that losing a friend can be really hard on anyone, so try to tread lightly. This doesn't mean that you have to pamper your child or even mention it, just make sure that your child knows that if they want to talk, you will listen and not be judgmental. They may not take you on it, but at the very least, they'll

know that there's someone who will always listen to what they have to say, and this can help a lot, especially if they've recently stopped being friends with someone who used to be a trusted confidant. 

Insights: What Does This Mean?

- ☞ According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy's research on peer influence, **a teen changes best friends about once a year**, and most often picks someone most like her or himself.
- ☞ Losing a best friend is a tremendous blow to anyone—including teens. It can feel as if the world is falling apart, and that they are alone, without a friend, or worse, without a posse. **Consolation, attention, and positive reinforcement of their character and attributes is essential** at this time.
- ☞ Friendships are critical to the positive development of adolescents. Teens can never have too many friends, and they need at least one to feel a part of their own culture. Parents can help their teen **think about what qualities to look for in a friend**, such as honesty and the acceptance of difference.
- ☞ Tell stories to your teen about the ups, downs, rewards and pitfalls of your own friendships. This can help you connect with your teen on a very personal level about shared experiences of joy and grief in friendships.



Peer Pressure

by Jemma, New Hampshire

It's pretty much impossible to know what is going on inside the maelstrom of the teenage mind. It's especially hard when the opinions and experiences are only coming from one teenager. I mean, we all have the same basic problems, but at the same time, we're all so different.

Both in school and out of school, we hate to admit it, and often we don't even notice it, but peer pressure is a huge guiding force in our decision making.

We know what types of things are socially acceptable, we know what is right and wrong, and we know what our parents deem acceptable.

However, when someone is on the spot, they don't always make the best choices. At this point in our lives, we aren't thinking about the long-term consequences of things like truancy and partying. We focus more on the direct future like, "Oh my God! My parents are gonna kill me when I get home!"

Teens also have a reputation for thinking they know everything and I certainly won't deny that. However, I do know this: peer pressure has almost everything to do with who your friends are.

The High School student body consists of a complex series of cliques and subcliques within cliques. There are also basic labels: party animals, punks, popular kids, pot heads, skateboarders, jocks, Jesus freaks, nobodies, etc. They're not all

nice names when you think about it, but after living with that for so long, it seems perfectly normal.

Each group has its own pressures. Partying and drinking, feeling like you have to be crazy and original all the time, feeling like you have to be funny and liked, like you need to smoke pot and try different drugs, feeling like it's uncool to do school work or homework, like you have to be the best at something, or that you're going to be judged if you have different ideals and beliefs. There is pressure to look good and pressure to have sex, especially in relationships.

Big list huh? Our lives can be pretty stressful too.

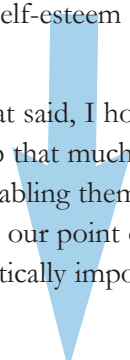
No one wants to let their friends down or feel like a loser or ruin the fun. We want people to like us so we cave under it.

By the age of 15, I had experienced almost all of these examples and probably tons more that I didn't even think of. I know first hand how hard it is to think and act for yourself sometimes.

It's also frustrating for a teen when they're torn between what their friends want them to do, and what they would do on their own.

Individuality and independence are things that a lot of teens haven't established yet, so doing what others want is the easiest way out. Being an individual can easily mean being the weird kid, and we can definitely be

vicious to the weird kid. You see, we also lack self-esteem so we make fun of others to feel better about ourselves and it doesn't take much to make someone else who is lacking in self-esteem to feel like a total loser.

With all that said, I hope to make a parent's job that much easier through enabling them to better understand our point of view. Even if it is practically impossible. 

Insights: What Does This Mean?

☘ **Peer pressure is often seen as negative, but it has many positive aspects.** Peers help each other determine who is okay to go out with, who's a good boyfriend or girlfriend, how far to go sexually in a relationship, and when to end a relationship.

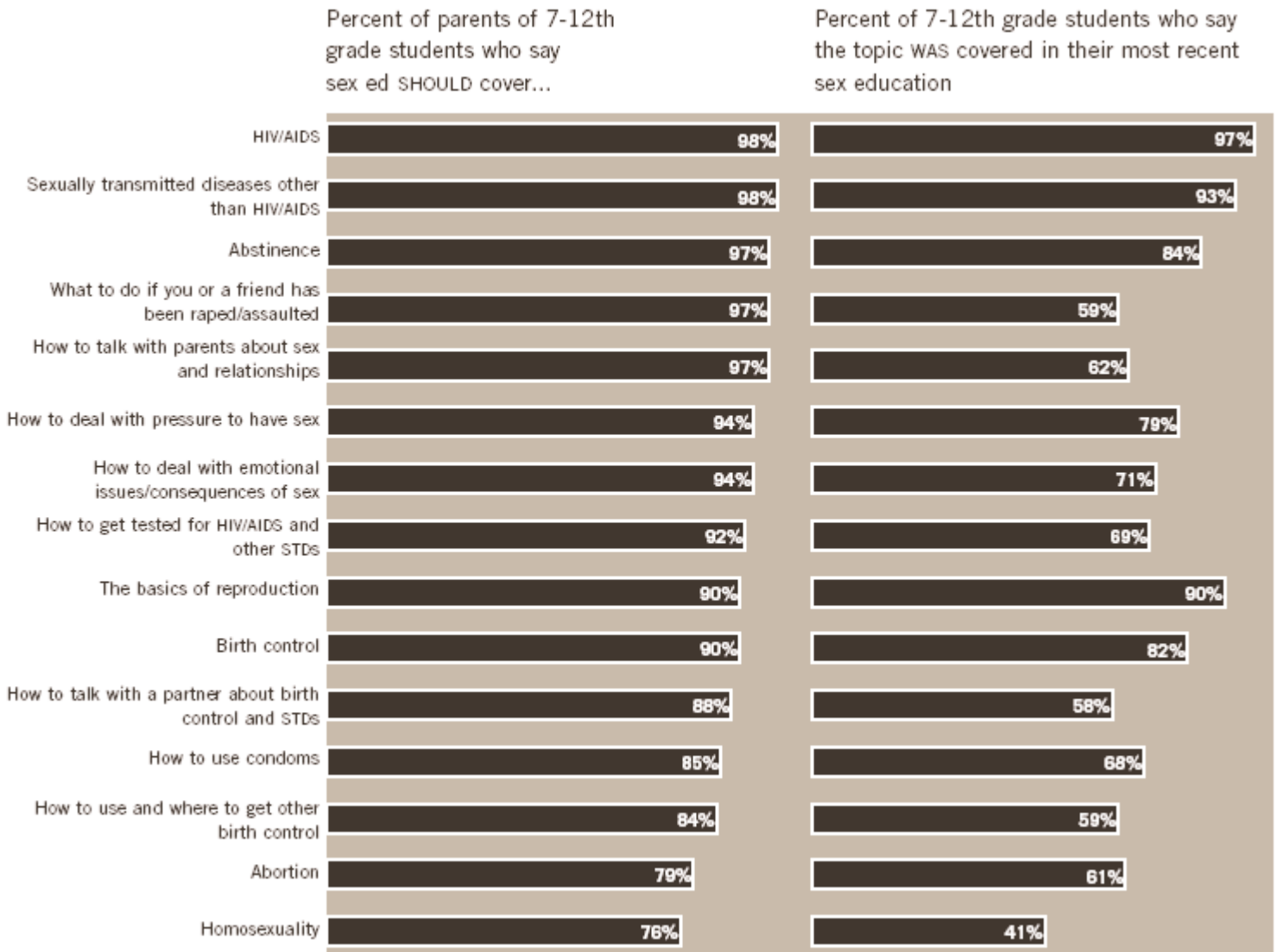
☘ **A teen's own clique sets the standards and creates the rules—no one else does.** It is always within the clique's power to be inclusive or exclusive, to accept difference, and to not be judgmental. **It's a parent's job to point out where the power lies.**

☘ **Teens are influenced most by their own immediate clique and not by the "most popular" clique.**

☘ **Know your teen's circle of friends.** Recognize that there are sometimes high-risk friends in the mix. These friends don't always influence the clique—often the clique influences the "high-risk" teens.

Sex Education in Schools: What's going on?

FIGURE 5. WHAT PARENTS WANT



Will you make up the difference?

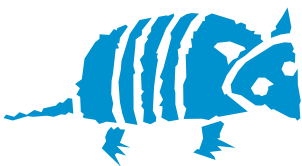
"Sex Education in America: A Series of National Surveys of Students, Parents, Teachers, and Principals," (#3048), The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, September 2000. This information was reprinted with permission from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is a nonprofit, private operating foundation focusing on the major health care issues facing the nation and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.

Taking A Risk

by Ana, Maine

I believe that I learned more from my relationship with Matt than from anything else that I was taught in high school. In saying this, I do not believe my experience to be typical of all teenagers. I am very lucky to have partaken in such a healthy long term relationship between the ages of fifteen and seventeen. My time with Matt can be measured by one love, two years, three fiddle fests, four continents, or five songs, but no matter how I look at it, that period of my life was invaluable.

To this day I still don't know how he mustered the courage to ask me to join him and his buddies on a camping trip. We shared common friends but we had never really conversed before Matt stopped me on the street that beautiful summer day. With his huge clown-like smile he told me about an adventure he and his two friends, Silas and Adam, were planning on Jewell Island the next week. My friends warned me against it. "I don't know Ana," Nate cautioned, "I hear that all those kids do is smoke pot, and make longboards. Being stuck on a island off the coast of



Even though I heard the validity of Nate's point, the fact that my mom

Maine for three days with them is not smart."

was out of town and that I was left under the charge of a family friend made this little venture into the woods all too easy and tempting. I decided to risk it and spend three days bonding with the boys.

There are many situations where parents feel the tension between giving their teen the opportunity to make their own judgments and the parents' role of setting boundaries. It is especially hard when a teen demonstrates responsibility and thoughtfulness. Don't shy away from this tension. Most teens need structure and boundaries to help them succeed.

—Catriona McHardy, Vice-President of Education and Training, PPNNE

Those days were all I needed to plunge into a new group of very close friends. The four of us became an inseparable crew. Now, with all of them in college, we still reminisce with stars in our eyes about the "good ol' days of Jewell Island." It wasn't long after this island adventure that Matt and I started dating.

Almost instantly Matt and I morphed from two freethinking human beings into one unit. Now, as unhealthy as this might sound, our dynamic was actually more wholesome than I or he had guessed it would be. From being so close with Matt I was able to leech off of his positive qualities. One example

of how my perceptions changed because of him is our differences in how we view family. Matt comes from a very tight, very sweet, and very functional family unit. My personal experience has been quite different. Although both of my parents are great and loving people, they are divorced (as is the trend in my dad's marriages). Growing up as a child of parents who in the future would split up did not render me with the most positive view of relationships. Subconsciously, I was very wary of the idea of committing to another person because of the environment in which I had been raised. Matt's perception of marriage is just the opposite. From having such a close and loving relationship with him I learned to loosen up on my

paranoid views regarding commitment. Also, from being able to spend so much time with his family my whole perception of family shifted. The change in my feelings towards serious relationships is just one of the things that I gained from dating Matt.

The most significant way in which I benefited from spending two years joined at the hip with Matt was the change in how I view myself. I, along with most fifteen year olds, had no idea who I was when I first began going out with Matt. I was confused and very insecure. I had started public high school as a new student. This big school was very different from the private

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Going to College

by Leslie, New Hampshire

All through high school the thought of going to college was always one that was exciting, and quite frankly something I couldn't wait for. And as senior year zipped past it was as though college was right around the corner and the next thing I knew I was moving in. The first weekend was a blur, meeting my roommate, the other girls on my floor, and all the activities they had planned for the freshman class. I also had to say goodbye to my parents in a different way than before. All of a sudden they weren't here, no curfew, no one to check in with everyday, no one or nothing familiar to see everyday, just new people and new experiences.

The interesting part about this all is that when talking to other friends who were in college when I was still in high school, they never happened to mention how difficult it would be to adjust to this new life, how much harder college classes were, and how "grown-up" it feels to be more on your own than ever before. To say the least I was left in a whirlwind of conflicting emotions, actions and opinions on myself and life.

Now, instead of my parents, I had my roommate. We got along from day one. She was feeling the same way I was and we helped each other through the tough days, and have since spent nearly ever minute together. We'll be rooming together next year. This is quite rare I would

say by seeing how many of my friends have already either changed roommates, or get along enough to be civil in the room but that's about it. To be honest I'm not sure how they did it, I needed my roommate

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with me every step of the way, just like I needed my parents.

One huge change was the classes. Especially when taking the intro courses that all freshmen have to take, when you are 1 in 150 students, there's no one on one time with teachers, to them you are just a number. This was a huge change for me, coming from a high school where the largest class size was 25. Another thing, students if you have the opportunity to take AP level courses in high school, TAKE THEM, they may be the only classes that will prepare you for how much homework and reading you have to do as well as how difficult the tests can be. But besides classes, college life was probably the thing that took the most adjusting to.

Once you somewhat settle into a clique of friends, weekends can be a lot of fun, most students go out to

fraternity or house parties, or just hang out in the dorms, which may not be as innocent as it sounds. But the interesting part is that all of a sudden it doesn't matter what time you end up back in your room, you don't have a curfew (except for students that play a varsity sport, and sometimes when trying to join a sorority or fraternity) no one is going to check in to see if you're home by one; no one cares. And that alone has its ups and downs.

Another interesting aspect of being at college is calling your other friends from high school to see how they are managing and so on. But that is also different now, it can feel like you've lost touch, you spend most of your time trying to update each other on what's been going on for the last month, and it's a weird realization to not have them already know what's going on in your life; you all now have different lives, different problems and new friends. Not saying that you lose connection with the friends you've known since second grade the minute you move away, but the relationships alter greatly. Everyone says at graduation we'll stay in touch and come visit, and to an extent that happens, but there is certainly a change.

But I'm not trying to say in the least that coming to college hasn't been one of the best experiences of


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Taking A Risk

—continued from page 8

school which I had just left. At this vulnerable point in my life, Matt offered a safe and supportive environment where I was able to search out who I was becoming without shame or fear. I honestly don't know where I'd be had he not come into my life; I would certainly not be writing a column for Planned Parenthood! Matt did so much for my self esteem at such a pivotal and impressionable age. I am so lucky to have had him in my life.

Matt and I broke up this year when he went to college. We know that trying to sustain a relationship at a four hour distance isn't beneficial to me, him, my car, or his phone bill. The distance isn't all that broke us apart. We both understand that we are still growing and learning and need room in which to do so.

Will I ever date Matt again? Who knows. But for now, I'm grateful for what we had, and excited to see where I'm going next. Thanks Matt. 

"[Some] parents are like, 'Yeah, when you start having sex, tell me about it.' And then you're like, 'I'm already having sex.' And it's like, 'You're doing WHAT!?!'."

—PPNNE Teen Council Member, Burlington, VT

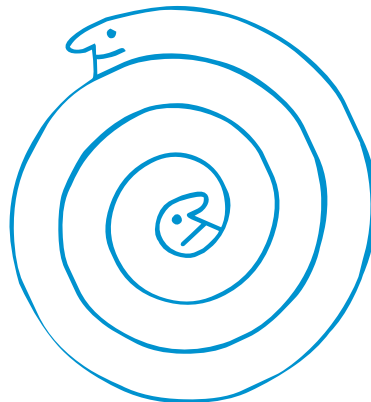
Insights: What Does This Mean?

🌀 How can parents tell when something good is going to result from a "risky" adventure? Sometimes questionable initial choices end up being turning points full of positive and life-altering changes. Remember that there are many good stories like this one.

🌀 **It is a parent's job to point out the risks facing their teens.** Be honest. Share your concerns and build in safety nets together.


🌀 **It is sometimes difficult for adults to recognize the depth a teen's relationship can take.** Many teens report that their relationships with a girlfriend or boyfriend have significant impacts on their lives. Believe them.

🌀 Be very thoughtful and cautious when pointing out "this relationship may be your first, but not likely your last..." Parents can offer the gift of perspective to their teen, but work very hard to offer your perspective without judgment or unintentionally dismissive comments; heartbreak is not preventable and can teach a teen a lot about life and relationships.



Going to College

—continued from page 9

my life, I have met so many great people, have taken some really interesting classes, and been through many challenging but memorable experiences. I'm looking forward to next year in a different way, I feel as though I will be able to take more out of the experience now that I've had this year of adjustment, but I wouldn't change a single thing that happened my freshman year, it may have been difficult but it has prepared me for what's to come. 

Insights: What Does This Mean?

🌀 High school graduation doesn't mean teens are ready for life without parental support and involvement. Parents still need to openly and consistently demonstrate their love and belief in their teen's abilities.

🌀 The prefrontal cortex, which assesses risk and problem-solves, is not fully matured until the mid-'20s. **Help teens analyze the situations they face as they move into their new world after high school graduation.**

🌀 **Keep the lines of communication open by giving older teens your listening ear more than your heartfelt opinions.** Ask questions that help them gain insight and put aside your questions that are fear-based.

Tips for Talking

by PPNNE's Education and Training Department

☞ It's never too late to start.

Research has shown that teenagers do listen to their parents when it comes to sexuality.

☞ **You may have to initiate the conversation.** Your teen may not ask you directly, but that doesn't mean he or she doesn't have questions or concerns. Young people need information, and they pick it up from different sources. If you want your teen to get information based on your values, speak up.

☞ **Forget the "big talk."** Have regular conversations with your teens about sex and sexuality. It's a huge topic and perceptions change as children get older.

☞ **Knowing how to start the conversation is sometimes the biggest barrier.** It often only takes figuring out the first few words. Your own honesty, empathy and commitment will keep the conversation going. Think of concrete words, like "I remember when...", "Have you ever noticed...", or "I read this thing..."

☞ **Talk about respect and honesty in romantic relationships as well as friendships.** Discuss your values and listen for theirs.

☞ **Respect the importance of your teen's relationships.** Friendships and romantic relationships are a vital part of your teens' lives—judgment and criticism can shut down a conversation.

☞ There's nothing wrong with being embarrassed, and there's nothing wrong with telling your teen that you're embarrassed.

Exposing your embarrassment is preferable to letting your embarrass-

68% of teens say that what their parents think influences their sexual decision making.

90% say that how well they know and trust their partner influences their sexual decision making.

"SexSmarts – Relationships: A Series of National Surveys of Teens About Sex." The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Seventeen Magazine, October 2002.

ment silence you. Make it clear that the embarrassment belongs to you and not to your teen or the topic.

☞ **You don't need to know the answer to every question.** If you don't know an answer, you and your teens can make use of local resources—websites, libraries, doctors, nurses, Planned Parenthood health centers, etc.

☞ **Be aware of your body language.** Teenagers notice when our words and body language are not giving consistent messages.

☞ **Be patient.** You might have to talk about the same thing more than twice. Each time any of us listens to information about sexuality, we learn something new.

☞ **Don't forget your sense of humor.** In fact, use it to your advantage. Tell your teens about the misconceptions you had about sex when you were their age.

☞ **Ask your teens for their opinion.** Their self-respect begins with the consideration they receive from others.

☞ **Good decision-making requires accurate information.** Make sure your teen has sound information about birth control and sexually transmitted infections.

☞ **Educate yourself about gay, lesbian and bisexual issues for teens.** Oppression, discrimination and stereotypes are common experiences for gay, lesbian and bisexual teens. Support them.

☞ **Whether you want them to or not, your son or daughter may engage in sexual behavior.** Help them make the right healthy decisions about sexuality and relationships.

☞ **Don't be afraid to make a mistake.** It's good role-modeling, it can keep the conversation going, and it makes adults more approachable.



**Remember:
listen more than talk.**

Resources

Books for Teens

Changing Bodies, Changing Lives. Ruth Bell, Three Rivers Press, 1998.

Deal with It! A Whole New Approach to Your Body, Brain, and Life as a gURL. Esther Drill, Heather McDonald, Rebecca Odes, Pocket Books, 1999.

GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer & Questioning Teens. Kelly Huegel, Free Spirit Publishing, 2003.

The Guy Book: An Owner's Manual. Mavis Jukes, Random House, 2002

Fact:

Percentage of teens who say they haven't had a single conversation with their parents about sex: **37%**.

—National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (2002).

Books for Parents

Beyond the Big Talk: Every Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Teens, From Middle School to College. Debra Hafner, MPH, Newmarket Press, 2002.

Cliques: 8 Steps to Help Your Child Survive the Social Jungle. Charlene C. Giannetti and Margaret Sagarese, Broadway Books, 2001.

Sex and Sensibility: The Thinking Parent's Guide to Talking Sense About Sex. Deborah Roffman, Perseus Publishing, 2001.

Teaching Human Sexuality: A Guide for Parents and Other Caregivers. Judy Cyprian, CWLA Press, 2001.

The Real Truth About Teens & Sex. Sabrina Weill, Berkeley Publishing, 2005.

Why Do They Act That Way? David Walsh, Ph.D., Free Press, 2005.

Websites for Teens

www.teenwire.com

www.ppnne.org

www.iwannaknow.org

www.advocatesforyouth.org

www.sxetc.org

www.scarleteen.com

www.goaskalice.com

www.itsyoursexlife.com

Websites for Parents

www.familiesaretalking.org

www.siecus.org

www.advocatesforyouth.org

www.talkingwithkids.org

www.teenpregnancy.org

www.ppnne.org/parents

G U L P ! is a newsletter designed to help parents talk with their children about sexuality. It is published by Planned Parenthood of Northern New England (PPNNE). PPNNE provides reproductive health and education services to women, men, and teens throughout Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Call **1.800.488.9638**.