

FEATURES

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'Let's Talk' about sex, parents and kids

By FRAN ELLERS
The Courier-Journal

If you're like most well-meaning parents, you've been determined to handle the subject of sex with your children better than your parents handled it with you.

Didn't you teach them the correct words for their genitals when they were 3? Didn't you read them that helpful book about how Mommy and Daddy are different? Didn't you start talking about eggs and sperm when they were in third grade?

So why is it that now, as your kids are finally reaching puberty, you suddenly feel so inept?

Janice Jackson of Oldham County knows how you feel. When her kids were growing up, Jackson,

who has been active for years in the Kentucky PTA, went to workshop after workshop on talking to kids about sex, or drugs, or smoking.

She would rush home to practice what she had learned — only to have her teen-age son and daughter roll their eyes and say, "You've been to another training."

Today Jackson hopes to teach parents a better way as a leader of the new "Let's Talk" program for parents of middle school students in Jefferson and surrounding counties, sponsored by several local planning and health agencies.

The idea is for parents to meet in small groups to help *each other* become more comfortable talking about sex, regularly, with their adolescent children.

"You can't wait until you're in a crisis," Jackson said. At the same time, you can't force your kids to listen if they don't want to. "It takes when everybody's relaxed" to have a good conversation about

sex and sexuality, she said.

The reason it's so critical to have those conversations, the Let's Talk planners say, is that a surprising number of children start having sex in middle school. A 1995 survey of 4,000 high school students in the Jefferson County schools showed that more than half had had intercourse, and nearly half of those had had it when they were 13 or younger.

At the same time, teens typically say that they would rather get sex information from their parents than from their friends, said Amber Davies, a coordinator of the program.

But how do you, as a parent, make them listen?

Actually, by learning to listen first — to yourself as well as your kids. The current White House sex scandal is a good example. While it has given parents a golden opportunity to talk to their children about responsible sexual relationships, experts advise taking time,

first, to ask what your child thinks about it, and what her questions are.

The Let's Talk workshop prepares parents by helping them think about their experiences learning about sex, and their goals for their children. They also talk about the pressures their kids may be under.

Then they join each other in role playing: What do you do when your sixth-grader is starting to make phone calls to the opposite sex, and you still haven't had that "sex talk"? What if your 13-year-old daughter tells you a friend of hers is pregnant?

The answers are as individual as parents themselves. The Let's Talk workshops are designed to help parents find their own answers — again, by learning from the struggles of others.

Quite simply, "We want parents to know that it's a tough job, and that's OK," Jackson said.



BY PAM SPAULDING, THE COURIER-JOURNAL
Peggy Torres, who will be a trainer for the "Let's Talk" program, gave a thumbs down to a question raised in one discussion group.

You can talk to your kids about sex, and here's how. Page 4.