

CASUAL SEX BECOMES SUBJECT FOR MIDDLE SCHOOLERS

ON THE BUS, AT THE MOVIES, EVEN IN CLASS, YOUTHS ARE MORE FRANK ABOUT IT

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is currently asking teens to share a secret: Are you having sex? The question it wants to ask on its survey but can't: Are you having oral sex?

Dr. Lloyd Kolbe, director of the CDC's Adolescent and School Health Program, said a committee that approves the survey thought the question was too risqué. Yet a trend currently rippling across the country suggests that the agency should track the behavior, Kolbe said. The concern does not end with high schoolers.

Two girls from West Hills Middle School in the Bloomfield Hills district said recently they slid into a seat at the back of the school bus, swapping gossip on the ride home, when they noticed something going on behind them. They peered over the seat to find a girl with her hand down her boyfriend's pants.

For Caitlin Neal, 13, and Christine Morrison, 14, the West Bloomfield teens who were on their way home from a forensics tournament that night, catching a glimpse of their schoolmates performing sex acts in public has become common.

Adolescents now moving through middle and senior high schools have redefined words like abstinence and intercourse, embracing an increasingly casual attitude toward oral sex. In fact, many teens say they believe oral sex is not sex at all.

The result could be a generation that is increasingly promiscuous, startlingly frank and beginning to experiment as young as 10, teachers said.

Last week, over pizza with friends Erin Kashawlic, 14, and Alyssa Baron-Klask, 14, the girls talked about a classmate who gave a boy oral sex on a dare in front of a group of friends behind an elementary school. They talked about weekend nights in a local movie theater when classmates masturbated their boyfriends while moviegoers looked at the screen ahead. They talked about the girl who masturbated a boy during math class when a substitute teacher was oblivious.

"It wasn't the first time they've done it, but it was the first time they did it in class," Caitlin said. Detective Ron Halcrow, the Birmingham Police Department's juvenile officer, said two teens were recently prosecuted for having oral sex in a public place. Further details about the case were unavailable. But Deborah Carley, chief deputy prosecutor for the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office, said charges could range from

felony criminal sexual conduct to indecent exposure, a misdemeanor, depending on the ages of those involved. "These are cavalier activities for kids," Halcrow said. "They treat sex like washing their hands or changing their socks."

These blase attitudes come as a 15-year-old Bloomfield Township girl recently detailed her secret life, sneaking out in the middle of the night at age 14 to have sex with 22 teens and young men. Four men are charged with rape.

Bloomfield Hills school officials said that students, including those from West Hills Middle School, are given a code of conduct each year. Kids know that getting caught doing anything sexual at school will result in counseling or suspension, depending on the act, said Jennifer Woliung, district spokeswoman.

Still, the West Hills girls, who describe themselves as the school's abstinent geeks, talk about sex in a matter-of-fact tone. "Everybody jokes about all of this stuff at school," Christine said.

Communication gap

About 50 percent of the nation's teens have had sexual intercourse, nearly 10 percent by age 13, a 1999 CDC survey revealed. Still, sex education teachers say that teens are hearing the message to choose abstinence or to protect themselves against pregnancy. The problems lie elsewhere.

"There's a huge disparity in the definitions from adults to young people," said Diane Waggoner, the health education consultant for Oakland Schools, the county's intermediate school district. "When I talk to kids about oral intercourse, they look at me funny because they don't consider it intercourse. A lot of kids think that since they can't get pregnant with oral sex, they are practicing abstinence and are safe."

According to the CDC, half of the 40,000 new cases of HIV infection every year occur in people younger than 25. One of every four teens has a sexually transmitted disease. Despite declining numbers, there are still 1 million teen pregnancies every year. "We are hearing many anecdotes that concern us that young people are rapidly engaging in oral intercourse as a way of being safer," Kolbe said. "What young people must understand is that it is possible through oral intercourse to be infected with HIV and other serious STDs," or sexually transmitted diseases.

But some students say their peers are not listening. Norah Herman, a 17-year-old junior at West Bloomfield High, said, "The message most kids hear is not to get pregnant, so many kids are on birth control. But people don't talk about STDs. They think that nothing can go wrong and that they're invincible."

Furthering the confusion is the question of virginity. Teens are using oral sex as a precursor to vaginal intercourse, Waggoner said. They use it when they are not ready for intercourse. Girls are using it as a way to remain virgins, said Lisa Remez, associate editor of a sexual and reproductive health journal for the Alan Guttmacher Institute.

"It's a way for girls to get around the socially constructed norms of sexual behavior," said Remez, author of an article about teen attitudes toward oral sex.

Remez added that girls often feel peer pressure to have sex but choose oral sex first because they view it as something they control, whereas vaginal sex is seen as something boys control. Matt Harsha-Strong, an 18-year-old senior at Novi High School, agrees. "There's a major difference between guys and girls when it comes to sex," said Harsha-Strong. "Guys feel more pressure to lose their virginity earlier. It's a hallmark of being a man among kids today. "The other difference is girls are really scared about getting pregnant, it's part of the reason oral sex has increased. We know you can get STDs from oral sex but kids feel that it's still safer," he said.

Aware of the misinformation among teens, educators in Rochester are making changes. In January, the district approved a new sex education curriculum that defines sexual intercourse as vaginal, anal and oral intercourse. The move came after district leaders heard anecdotal evidence that teens are calling themselves abstinent even when they have oral sex, said Betty Crowder, the district's health program consultant.

A cavalier culture

There are teens who know what is fact and what is fiction. Herman, the West Bloomfield High junior, chooses to abstain from sex and credits her parents for trusting her and giving her good information. "My parents talked to me about the consequences of sex and how to respect my body so I don't feel the need to perform sexual activities for kicks, for a good time or for acceptance," Herman said. "I'm in the minority, though. Attitudes are pretty relaxed about sex in general. I'm just not relaxed about it." As an explanation of this casual attitude toward sex and early experimentation, many teens point to sexually explicit movies, music and magazines. In April, the Kaiser Family Foundation, a health research agency, found that of the 503 teens surveyed, 72 percent said the sexual content on television influences their behavior.

Tracy Morrison, parent of a West Hills student, said she was shocked to learn how early kids are beginning to dabble in sex and learn the lingo. "I've been surprised about a lot of things, like the kissing in the hallways at school," said Morrison. "She also says things like, 'Mom, what is a blow job?' or 'What is a hand job?' "

"There are a lot of parents who don't know, or don't see, what's going on." Experts say parents can't afford to be squeamish talking about sex with their kids.

"Parents need to wake up," said Alice McCarthy, author of "Healthy Teens Facing the Challenges of Young Lives." "The most effective parents are the ones who talk to their kids about everything -- morals, what they believe sexuality is, about sports and friends. The ones who aren't getting through are the ones who just tell their kids not to get pregnant."

Teachers said the next concern is oral sex in elementary schools. Fifth- and sixth-graders know what it is and some have already told teachers they've tried it, said Waggoner, the Oakland Schools' consultant. The girls from West Hills were not surprised. They know how younger kids are learning.

Caitlin said that parents often ask them to let their kid brothers and sisters tag along with them when they go out. "That's how little kids are getting exposed to this stuff," she said. Contact MARSHA LOW at 248-586-2610 or low@freepress.com <<mailto:low@freepress.com>>.

SIDEBAR:

PARENTAL GUIDE

A parent's guide to conversations about sex and tips to promote a healthy lifestyle for teens:

- Be clear about your own sexual values and attitudes.
- Talk with children early and often about sex, and be specific. Studies show that kids most often want information about sex to come from parents. Don't lecture; have two-way conversations. This allows parents to learn what kids already know and correct misinformation.
- Strive for a parent-child relationship that is warm in tone, firm in discipline, rich in communication and emphasizes mutual trust and respect.
- Supervise and monitor activities. Parents should establish clear rules, curfews and expectations for behavior.
- Know your child's friends and their families.
- Discourage early, frequent and steady dating.
- Take a strong stand against kids dating older people. Such dating patterns may lead to risky situations that younger teens may be unable to handle.
- Help teens set goals for themselves. Kids who have plans for the future often delay sex to focus on obtaining their goals.
- Know what your kids are watching, reading and listening to.

Source: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

For more information or help [in the Detroit area]:

Sexual abuse may be reported to Children's Protective Services, 248-975-5010 anytime. For help, call: Common Ground Sanctuary anytime at 800-231-1127; Teen Hot Line at 248-292-0194, or 248-292-0195, 4-10 p.m.; HAVEN at 248-334-1274 anytime or visit www.haven-oakland.org <<http://www.haven-oakland.org>>.

Information about sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/ AIDS may be obtained by calling: the Oakland County Health Division at 248-858-1302, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, noon-8 p.m. Monday; AIDS Hot Line, 800-872-AIDS, 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. weekdays; Beaumont Community Health Education at 248-577-9280 anytime; Planned Parenthood of Southeast Michigan, 800-230-7526 anytime.

Source: Teen Yellow Pages, produced by the National Council of Jewish Women
Greater Detroit Section.