

#3

Jellison 1/15/1999

*Washington Post*

Thursday, July 8, 1999, Page A1

Parents Are Alarmed by an Unsettling New Fad in Middle Schools: Oral Sex

By Laura Sessions Stepp

Washington Post Staff Writer

The mother of an Arlington [Virginia] teenager will never forget the phone call she received from Williamsburg Middle School, where her daughter was in the eighth grade. "I'd like to invite you to a meeting about girls at risk," said Latanja Thomas, the eighth-grade school counselor.

"What risk?" the mother asked. "Eating disorders?"

"No."

"Drugs?"

"No."

"Well, what is it?"

"Oral sex."

"I about dropped the phone," the mother recalled. "I was stunned." So were other parents of girls at Williamsburg who took similar calls that evening and showed up for a meeting in the school library a few nights later. The principal, Margaret McCourt-Dirner, told about 25 assembled parents that as many as a dozen girls and two or three boys had been engaging in oral sex through most of the school year. The teens, 13 and 14 years old, were getting together at parties in one another's homes and at local parks.

The news dropped like a bomb just over a year ago in the mostly upper-income community of elegant brick homes, leafy sycamores and stone walls, where wealth is acquired by working long hours at top professional jobs. These parents were unaware of a disturbing pattern of middle-schoolers' adopting an "anything but intercourse" approach to sex. Eager to avoid pregnancy and hold on to virginity, an increasing number of teenagers are engaging in oral sex, according to school and health officials.

"It's now the expected minimum behavior," said Michael Schaffer, supervisor for health education in Prince George's County for the past 15 years. "The kids say if you're not going to have sex, at least do this."

"I've been teaching in schools for 30 years," said Deborah Roffman, a human sexuality consultant to 15 schools in the Baltimore-Washington corridor. "I am receiving an increasing number of inquiries about incidents of oral sex among young adolescents, both at parties and occasionally at school. Kids are not just asking about oral sex anymore. They're talking about it, some are doing it, and adults are clueless."

Joan Foster, guidance counselor at White Oak Middle School in Silver Spring [Maryland] for seven years, worries about the same trend. Oral sex, she said, "has suddenly become 'la mode de la sex.'" Although young people have engaged in sexual experimentation openly since the 1960s and covertly since the dawn of time, social scientists have no reliable measures for comparing behavior today with patterns in the past. National surveys of teen sexual behavior generally look only at high-schoolers, not younger students.

But in dozens of interviews, researchers and school officials throughout the Washington area said they are seeing something new in kids in their early teens: a casual approach to oral sex as a substitute for intercourse and as a reaction against the fear engendered by AIDS awareness programs. Young people are very casual about oral sex, said Patricia Hersch, author of a book about Reston [Virginia] adolescents, "A Tribe Apart: A Journey Into the Heart of American Adolescence." "To me, oral sex was more intimate than intercourse. Kids today absolutely don't see it that way. It's done commonly, with a shrug. It's part of the grab bag of sexual activities."

They may treat such intimacy casually, but adolescents as young as 11 are not prepared for its emotional repercussions, said Beth Knobbs, director of pupil services in Talbot County, on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

And the threat of disease is real. "What you're going to see in two to three years is a resurgence of some STDs [sexually transmitted diseases]. That's the trade-off," said Becky Ferguson, school nurse at Pine Grove Middle School in Parkville, east of Baltimore. In her eighth-grade health classes, she tells students that their immature bodies and short-term, multiple relationships make them more vulnerable than older populations to gonorrhea, chlamydia, herpes and other STDs. After that class, "girls come to me scared," she said.

The attitudes of these youngsters reflect their older brothers' and sisters' beliefs. Almost two out of three college students surveyed several years ago by the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction said oral sex is not equivalent to having sex. Counselors and sexual behavior researchers estimate that by the time students are in high school, about half are having oral sex.

There's no way to know the proportion of younger teens who are behaving similarly, but teachers, parents and teens said they see the first signs in seventh grade.

"I knew a couple of kids in seventh grade who were doing it," said a boy who just finished ninth grade at a private school in Baltimore.

"By eighth grade, there were a lot more. In ninth, it's not like everybody is doing it, but it's much more common." He said he attended two parties at friends' houses this past semester where several couples engaged in oral sex. He also knows a seventh-grade girl who, in an effort to be cool, told her friends this year that she had had oral sex with him, which she had not. "It has become a popularity kind of thing," he said.

At a middle school in Talbot County, officials this year learned through the student grapevine that a girl and a boy, both eighth-graders, had engaged in oral sex in a crowded study hall. The incident followed by only a few months a similar event on a school bus of seventh-graders returning from a field trip. In both cases, the students were advised to seek counseling, school authorities said.

Some youths have even seen oral sex as a way to make money. At Langston Hughes Middle School in Reston last year, a seventh-grader whom school officials described as "very bright" attempted to arrange oral sex dates between classmates for money. His scheme, in the works for several weeks, fizzled after students tipped off the school's police officer. The boy was arrested, convicted of solicitation and sentenced to a juvenile detention center.

According to two boys who ran with the Williamsburg crowd in Arlington, their sexual activity began as petting late in seventh grade. "We were at a party at this house, a whole bunch of guys and girls," one boy said. "We planned out who would go into the bathroom, who would go into the closet. That pioneered everything."

Only one couple engaged in oral sex at that party, according to these boys, but as spring turned into summer and then into the fall of eighth grade, more boys and girls started "hooking up" in relationships that might last a couple of weeks or fizzle in a few hours.

The two boys said they had heard about oral sex from older siblings and friends. Typically, they asked girls to do it, they said. That's what happened to one girl who recalled her first experience at the start of eighth grade. At a local park, she and a bunch of friends paired up, and she found herself with a boy she "kinda liked." He asked her to perform, making her think they'd start going together if she complied.

"I didn't really know what it was," she said, but he showed her. "I realized pretty soon that it didn't make him like me."

She said she engaged in oral sex twice more that year, including at a party in early spring that eventually led to the principal finding out about the group. The party was held on a Saturday night at a girl's house. About an hour after the party started, the action moved outside, under the deck, where several couples, including this girl and a boy she didn't even like, started having oral sex.

"We came back in and sat around and talked about it," this girl recalled. "It was no big deal." The girl said she was modeling herself after two others in the crowd whom she desperately wanted as friends. "They were doing it left and right," she said. "It started a chain reaction. I knew it was wrong, but these girls were like good friends with you one day, and not the next. I didn't want to do anything to make them not like me."

Her friends told her that oral gratification "is like a sexual thing that keeps us from having sex," she said. She bought the rationale. Easy explanations for the students' behavior eluded adults who knew them. Impulsive teenage hormones, some said. "There's been so much publicity around AIDS and abstinence," one mother said. "The kids thought this is one way we can express the feelings in our adolescent bodies."

"They would argue they were acting responsibly," another mom said. The kids offered other explanations. One girl said her most sexually active friends "just wanted to be out there on the edge." The girl who modeled herself after her friends said that her parents are divorced and she misses her father's attention. "I had, still have, sometimes, low self-esteem," she said.

Young adolescents have difficulty negotiating sex in a relationship, according to Peter Bearman, a Columbia University sociologist, and girls in eighth grade are particularly vulnerable because relating to boys has never been more important.

The girls in this crowd were no slouchers, pulling A's and B's at a school of about 1,000 students where test scores are consistently among Virginia's highest. Both boys and

girls sang in the chorus; several played basketball and soccer or ran track. (The Washington Post is withholding the participants' identities because of their age.) By the end of eighth grade, one boy said, he had hooked up with six girls. Alcohol and marijuana were not uncommon at eighth-grade get-togethers, he said.

He and a friend denied that the girls were coerced. "The girls made up this hook-up thing," said one boy, "and it turned out to mean a lot more to them than to us. The guys hooked up with the girls because the girls were hot. The girls wanted to have a relationship."

"I never thought I could get a disease," said the boy who claimed six partners. "I knew these people." Pregnancy, not disease, was the issue on the kids' minds. "My parents would totally kill me if I got pregnant," one girl said.

By the time of the spring party, several abstinent friends who ran with this crowd were getting worried. "There were no boundaries," said one such girl. "They didn't know when to quit."

"It was going too fast," one boy recalled. Finally, one of their crowd broke down and told Thomas, the school counselor, about the spring party. Thomas passed on the news to Principal McCourt-Dirner, who had heard similar accounts from teachers who kept their ears open to hallway conversations.

"I felt like we had to do something," McCourt-Dirner recalled. "There was a pretty loose supervision pattern going on. With that many kids participating, it was important to get the information to parents." Most of the youths had hoodwinked their parents, she said, pulling the old "I'll be at so-and-so's house" ruse and assuming, correctly, that their parents wouldn't check on them.

In a move she would later be criticized for, McCourt-Dirner asked only the girls' parents to the meeting. She started off by telling parents she had caught several eighth-grade girls slipping into the building after the recent spring musical. She suspected these girls had told their parents they were attending the musical. You need to get to know each other, she told the parents, and make sure your daughters are where they say they are. The conversation meandered until one mother could stand it no longer. "I got up and told them what my daughter was doing, that it didn't start with her and wouldn't stop with her," she said. Two other parents came forward, she said, but most seemed in denial.

"The thing you kept hearing was, 'But my daughter is in honors classes' " "Parents had tears in their eyes," said one mother who was present.

Several times parents asked, What about the boys? Why weren't their parents at the meeting? In an interview, McCourt-Dirner said she didn't bring the boys' parents together both because fewer boys were involved, and because she thought it would be more effective if teachers spoke to the parents individually. But two of the boys most intimately involved said neither they nor their parents were ever approached by a teacher, and McCourt-Dirner could not say for sure whether they were.

The girls' parents still smart from what they see as a double standard. "Our girls were portrayed as the bad girls," one mother said. "Where were the bad boys?"

While most of the youths resented the principal's intervention, several parents were grateful for it. "I thought I would be able to tell the day my daughter became sexually active," one mother said.

"I was dead wrong. This whole thing opened up a whole new avenue in my relationship to my daughter."

When some parents tried to speak to their daughters, the girls shrugged off the significance of what they had done. "What's the big deal? President Clinton did it," one said.

Many parents nonetheless instituted strict disciplinary measures.

Some grounded their daughters for weeks. Several started reading their daughters' diaries and checking their e-mail. Some began staying home in the afternoons to make certain their daughters did, too. Some took their daughters to be tested for disease and at least one arranged for her daughter to see a counselor. One mother told her daughter she couldn't listen to rap music anymore.

Some of the students now consider their behavior infantile and degrading. Oral sex is okay in a long-term relationship, they say, but not the way they were practicing it a year ago. "Even today, it shocks me so much that I put myself at that level," one girl said.

"I can't believe I was so weak." She and a friend have found that their reputation trails them in high school. "All the older girls hate us because they know what we did," she said. "They call us the 'Williamsburg ho's.'" She has heard that some middle school students this year followed in her group's footsteps, and that makes her sad. "We didn't set an example for the younger kids," she said.

Hindsight is everything. "Oral sex is not appropriate in middle school," she concluded. "You're still little. Heck, we're little now."