

Part I: Healthy Adolescent Sexual Development

Toward a Positive Approach to Adolescent Sexuality

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**"To the young people of this nation
Who must find their way
To sexual health
In a world of contradictions —**

**Where media scream,
'Always say yes,'
Where many adults admonish,
'Just say no,'
But the majority
Just say...
Nothing."**

— Dedication, *Teaching Safer Sex*

For a number of years, I have been puzzling over this idea of sexual health. Often, I begin workshops for professionals with an open-ended sentence: "When it comes to teen sex, most adults..." The responses are always the same: "Ignore it." "Think it is wrong." "Pretend it does not exist." "Do not want to deal with it." I then ask, "Teens think sex is..." The replies are equally predictable: "Fun." "Important." "Natural."

Next, stating the obvious, I note that whether or not adolescents have intercourse, they are very sexual people and I ask participants what would be the healthy and positive expression of that sexuality during the teen years. Rarely is anyone prepared to answer that question. Preoccupied with the dangers of teen sex — pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and date rape — most adults have a clear idea of what is wrong but little idea of what is right.

In search of a positive approach, I examined a variety of bibliographies on adolescent sexuality but found them completely dominated by the pregnancy

issue. For example, sex education programs are marketed and evaluated almost entirely for their ability to prevent unwanted outcomes of sexual behavior, preferably through abstinence. A plethora of research studies document when youth become "sexually active" by having intercourse, but they ignore other kinds of sexual activity as well as the entire subjective experience of sex for teens. Quantities of data also tell us how poor teens are as contraceptive users; but few data reveal the *quality* or meaning of teen sexual experiences.

I decided to take another tack. I examined cards, collected over the years during workshops for adults, on which participants have described a "peak sexual experience" and a "pit sexual experience." This is a final part of an exercise in which participants review their sexual life histories, select a peak and pit experience, and write each anonymously on cards that are then taped at the proper location on a "Life Line" (from 0 to 100 years) drawn on the board. Although the writers were teens in the 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s, their highly subjective remembrances do provide some clues for thinking about teen sexuality today.

For females, twice as many teen-year experiences were negative as positive; for males, negative and positive were about equal. However, some of the same themes appear on the negative cards of both females and males: not knowing enough information about sex; being sexually abused by an older person; and being unpopular. More males were concerned about masturbation guilt and about sexual identity. Many females noted the sex-negative messages they received (particularly from their mothers); extremely unhappy experiences with early intercourse; and, of course, unwanted pregnancies.

But more important for the purpose of this paper are their positive memories of teen sexuality. Females remembered having someone hold their hands and touch

Editor's Note:

This issue of the SIECUS Report is Part I of a two-part series on "Healthy Adolescent Sexual Development." Part II of the series will be published in the October/November issue of the SIECUS Report.

Because so many individuals speak of healthy adolescent sexual development yet fail to define or explain exactly what they mean when discussing the topic — and because so many important concerns are now focused on this critical period in a young person's development — we have asked experts in the field to provide a brief discussion of their opinions or views on the subject. For most people — even the experts — this is not, and has not been, an easy task. They, nonetheless, each have gracefully accepted the challenge and have provided us with unique and useful perspectives that may, separately and together, shed greater light on what is meant by healthy human sexuality.

Our hope is that by having an opportunity to explore a variety of views on this topic all of us will be better equipped to refine our own personal and professional ideas and conceptions; that we will be better able to respond to the question, "Just what is healthy adolescent sexual development?"; and that we may be better able to assist adolescents who are seeking their own individual answers to this question and to respond to and explore related issues and concerns.

In this spirit of exploration, and of seeking greater clarity on the topic, our readers are invited to send their personal and professional opinions and views to the editor as well.

them; a first kiss; frank discussions with their parents that set a base for the rest of their life relationships; learning to have an orgasm with a vibrator; feeling desirable and loved; swimming in the nude; mutually exploring and pleasuring short of intercourse (a great way of learning about their bodies and another's); discovering that sexual love is a wonderful dimension of relationship and that guilt is unnecessary; deciding to have intercourse; realizing that there is nothing wrong with being a sensual/sexual person; and developing a sense of self and of control over their sexuality.

Males remembered as peak sexual experiences a first date; kissing games at parties; first intercourse; first orgasm through masturbation; discussing sexual issues with a mixed peer group on a rational knowledge basis; and being involved in a sexual relationship which was thoroughly mutual and equal.

Such memories of adolescence, gathered in a more scientific way, could help us to discover the conditions

that enhance sexual development and those that impede it. But, meanwhile, adults determined to create a more positive approach to adolescent sexuality may want to try the following:

1. Think of a man and a woman whose sexuality you admire. If possible, talk to these people about the forces that helped each of them develop into the sexual person they are today.
2. List all the forces that influenced your sexuality during your teen years. Which enhanced your development? Which had a negative influence?
3. What are the positive and negative influences on the sexuality of teens today? What can be done to

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minimize the negative forces? To maximize the positive ones?

4. What is the major message about sex you want to give to teens? What can you do to spread that message?

During recent workshops, I have asked hundreds of professionals who work with teens to write their own definitions of healthy adolescent sexuality. The following list, divided rather arbitrarily into categories, is a compilation of their ideas.

Some Characteristics of Sexual Health in Adolescents

Body Image Awareness

He or she:

- Feels good about being male or female.
- Understands how the male and female reproductive systems function.
- Has a realistic and positive image of his/her body.
- Is not obsessively concerned with dress and appearance.
- Understands the stages of sexual development and how the body changes during the teen years.
- Knows that sexual feelings are normal and can be controlled.
- Knows his/her genital area and does not feel ashamed about his/her genitals.
- Feels comfortable with bodily functions.
- Is able to discuss the body without giggling or ridiculing.

Interpersonal Relationships

He or she:

- Is able to communicate feelings to others without being embarrassed.
- Is able to ask questions of parents and other adults about sex.
- Is able to express affection.
- Understands another person's viewpoint, e.g., boys and girls are able to understand each other.
- Has respect for another's individuality.
- Takes responsibility for his/her actions.
- Is aware of personal needs and is able to assert them with a partner.
- Knows his/her limits and is comfortable with setting limits.
- Feels that s/he has positive things to offer in a relationship.

Decision-making

He or she:

- Is able to decide what is "right" for himself/herself and acts in own best interests.
- Is able to assess risks in any situation and make

decisions based on the amount of risk s/he is willing to assume.

Has a sense of the future and is planning for it.
Has decided ahead of time what is or is not okay for him/her sexually.

Has confidence in himself/herself based on accurate knowledge.

Has a clear sense of his/her values and acts in congruence with those values.

Sexual Intimacy

He or she:

- Feels good enough about himself/herself not to have early sexual experiences in order to prove his/her sexuality.
- Understands that sexuality is more than just intercourse.
- Understands the consequences of sexual activity.
- Understands the difference between sexual feelings and love.
- Is able to experience sexual intimacy whether or not s/he has intercourse.
- Has accurate knowledge of birth control, and has the ability to talk with a partner about it and to use it before having intercourse.
- Knows that one can feel aroused and excited and yet have reasons for saying "no" to intercourse.
- Knows that one's feelings deserve respect from others.
- Is able to accept refusal for sex without feeling hurt.

This list is significant, not only because the characteristics listed are important, but because it is incomplete, suggesting a profound gap in adult thinking about adolescent sexuality. Several concepts central to human sexuality are missing, notably pleasure, sexual satisfaction and gratification, and orgasm. Here is our nemesis: the failure of most adults to acknowledge, or apparently even care about, the role of pleasure in adolescents' experience of their sexuality. Even adults who discount the usefulness of "just say no" are unlikely to advocate good sex for teens.

A positive approach to adolescent sexuality would be much more complete, recognizing pleasure as well as danger. In fact, in this world of confusing and contradictory sexual messages, we must condemn both the exploitation and the silence and validate sexuality as part of being human — even during the adolescent years.

Reference

1. Brick, P. with Charlton, C., Kunins, H. & Brown, S. Teaching safer sex. Hackensack, NJ: The Center for Family Life Education, Planned Parenthood of Bergen County, Inc., 1989.

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