

Sex at an Earlier and Earlier Age

By Kelly Patricia O'Meara

Adolescents are beginning to become sexually active at increasingly younger ages, according to researchers. But what are the causes of this social trend in America?

Rarely a week goes by without a new, more shocking, article or television documentary about American adolescents fixated with sex and, more specifically, openly discussing and admitting to participating in oral sex.

Take, for instance, the week of July 16, when both the *New York Daily News* and the *Washington Post Magazine* published shocking articles about the practices of young teens. The *Daily News* article, "Sex Crimes on Upswing," by Alison Gardar, focused on the increase in sexual insults and offenses that adolescents are forced to endure while attending school, and the *Post's* "Sex & Sensibility" by Liza Mundy reported on the peer pressure associated with participating in intercourse and other sexual activity.

In the latter, an eighth-grade girl recounted

a scenario that played out in her home with a boyfriend. "Let's go to your room. You can give me some [engage in fellatio] and then we'll go downstairs," said the boy. To which she replied, "No! You're nasty!"

Stories such as this frequently are being reported. At the same time a recently released study comparing the findings of four national surveys about the trends in adolescent sexual and reproductive behavior published by the Alan Guttmacher Institute's, or AGI's, peer-reviewed

journal, *Family Planning Perspectives*, found that sexual intercourse among adolescents is on the decline. Truly this is a conundrum. Adolescents are talking about sex and reportedly engaging in oral sex, yet intercourse among them is on the decline. Is it possible that school-age children have been led to believe that oral sex is safe or that it is not sex at all? And if either is the case, where did they get the idea?

Most of the professionals who study adolescent sexual behavior with whom *Insight* spoke say they doubt that the huge publicity about President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky has been a major factor in the changing trends, but given the enormous amount of media coverage devoted to detailing the White House sex scandal none would eliminate it from consideration. According to Tamara Kreinin, president of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, or SIECUS, a New York-based non-profit organization that advocates the right of individuals to make responsible sexual choices, "The Clinton/Lewinsky affair got people talking about oral sex just temporarily. Long before the Clinton affair we had MTV, which is very explicit. In the long run, I don't think it changed whether parents are talking to their kids. I think it was a slice of American life — for a brief time people were either talking about it or trying not to talk about it."

Kreinin says that now children are proving to "have been sexually active longer



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than we ever thought, but we don't have any good studies to really know about oral sex. What we do know is that we have large numbers of young people with sexually transmitted diseases, or STDs, and that is cause for alarm. Some kids are remaining abstinent and some are sexually active. It's just very hard to be definitive about the causes. When I go around to schools and speak to even sixth-graders, they tell me that they've engaged in oral sex and intercourse, but they also tell me that they want parents and adults to talk to them about it."

According to Kreinin, one solution is communication. "Parents," she explains, "need to talk with their children — and not just about sex. They need to talk about values and give them accurate information. Where is our society when parents are focused on making the mortgage and don't have enough time to ensure that our young people are meaningfully engaged in becoming productive citizens? And, in many ways, we're hypocritical about sex because many adults are not participating in committed relationships and are not as good role models as they should be."

Rachel Jones, a senior research associate at AGI, which says it is dedicated to protecting the reproductive choices of all women and men, tells *Insight* that there is no way of knowing if the reports of adolescent participation in oral sex are real or imagined or if there is any connection to the president's affair with Lewinsky. "There are a lot of researchers who are interested in this issue — whether oral sex has had any impact on the drop in rates of pregnancy and abortion, but there is no evidence to address it because the surveys, which usually are federally funded, do not allow for questions about oral sex. It goes along the lines that it isn't relevant to ask the question because it had no relationship to pregnancy," explains Jones.

"During the Clinton/Lewinsky thing, oral sex probably came up in conversations and parents felt compelled to address oral sex," says the research associate, "but I don't think it popularized it and certainly there are no data to support that it had any effect at all on adolescents. The fact that we're seeing articles about adolescents engaging in oral sex doesn't mean it's happening, but we don't really know. There have been polls among adults, but not any among teens on the Clinton/Lewinsky affair. Our research shows that teens are abstaining from sexual activity and are using better contraception. We don't factor oral sex into the surveys."

Pat Fagan, a William Fitzgerald

Innocence lost? Role models matter.



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Fellow on Family and Culture at the Washington-based Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, says he believes the problem goes well beyond the actions of the president. "Kids hear about this stuff from adults. They just have to look at television. They're not behaving differently than what daily is being thrown at them. Some of the biggest culprits are in the boardrooms of television companies. Sex no longer is regarded as a sacred or beautiful thing, but rather a commodity."

Fagan says that "in the past those who sold sex as a commodity were considered pornographers. Now it is Wall Street that comes right into the family room. Television brings into the intimacy of the family life and children's play what parents never would have permitted in the front gate of their home, much less the children's playroom."

According to Fagan, "What all of this shows is a much bigger picture. In

1950, for every 100 kids born that year, 12 entered a broken family. Four of the 12 were born out of wedlock and eight of 12 saw their parents divorce. Last year, for every 100 kids born, 60 entered a broken family, 33 were born out of wedlock and 27 saw their parents divorce. Beyond that, of all the children conceived in the United States last year, one-third were aborted. America has become a very dangerous place to be born into, with a very high risk of being rejected by at least one of their parents."

The consequences are presented easily enough, but how did this happen and what can be done about it? Fagan says, "The bottom line is that we have separated sex, children, love and marriage. We've put big walls between them, but they are all meant to be one with no division. So our kids, in the case of oral sex, are separating love from sex. To kids, love means mom and dad together will raise me. But now the conception of love isn't there. And it isn't being taught in public schools. In fact, if you try to teach it in public schools you run into real trouble. How we regard sexual acts has massive ramifications on how we organize the rest of society. It's a fundamental organizing dynamic and it has a huge impact on the view of marriage — the relationship between man and woman and parents and children."

Neither the *Washington Post Magazine* nor the *New York Daily News* raised the question of whether the Clinton/Lewinsky affair played a role in the focus on fellatio among middle-school children nor are there any data to support such a conclusion. Yet, for many, it is undeniable that oral sex entered the family vocabulary during the exposure of the president's relationship with the White House intern, leaving many parents and educators in the awkward position of having to explain or dodge uncomfortable questions.

Whether a correlation exists between the reported increase in younger adolescents engaging in oral sex, the decline in intercourse among older teens, and the president's affair has not been proved. What is clear, however, is that the data show young people appear to be as impressionable as ever but rethinking their sexual behavior. Where they are doing so with a focus on moral values, say experts left and right, the result only can be good for the American family. Where information about sexuality is left to the street, public scandal and political role models such as Clinton, these same experts say, what adolescents see is what we get.