

Survey: Kids ready for tough talk

Parents bring up sexual topics less than others

By JEREMY SINGER
Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — Children might not be hearing enough from their parents on such tough and touchy subjects as sex and AIDS, according to a survey released last week.

The poll is part of a national campaign called Talking With Kids About Tough Issues, which encourages parents to talk to their children.

The results show that 94 percent of parents of 8- to 12-year-olds have discussed substance abuse, and 84 percent have discussed violence.

But only 31 percent of parents have discussed handling pressure to have sex and 30 percent have talked about preventing pregnancy.

As for the children, the survey shows they would like to talk with their parents more about all of the topics. For example, 80 percent want more discussion of being safe from violence, 66 percent want more information about sexually transmitted diseases, and 58 percent want to know more about dealing with peer pressure to have sex.

"Sweeping tough issues under the rug will not prepare children for today's world," said Drew Altman, president of the Kaiser Family Foundation. "Parents do not need to be told they are failing yet again, but they do need the type of encouragement and help this campaign offers."

Kaiser and two other organizations, Children Now and the Advertising Council, sponsor the campaign.

The survey also indicates that parents have a more significant impact on their children's lives if conversations about difficult subjects start early. Fifty-four percent of 10- to 12-year-olds say their peers consider parents to be an important resource on issues such as sex, AIDS, violence, and

IN PERSPECTIVE

drugs and alcohol.

The findings did not surprise Kristi Hamrick, director of communications for the Family Research Council, a conservative Washington think tank.

She said a strong parent-child relationship is the most important factor in preventing early sex.

"I wouldn't accuse parents of any sluggishness if they haven't talked to their young children about sex," said Hamrick, who contended that it is more important for parents to discuss relationships and marriage with their young children before talking to them about sex.

"Parents do a lot for their children just by talking to them and spending time with them," she said.

Teens, however, are less likely to name parents as a common source on these topics (40 percent of 13- to 15-year-olds), and more likely to name friends — 60 percent of 13- to 15-year-olds, compared with 36 percent of 10- to 12-year-olds.

Children and teens say many young people today learn about sex, AIDS, violence and substance abuse from television, movies and music.

A campaign booklet, "Television as a Tool," focuses on opportunities presented by TV and other media to complement parents' conversations with children on tough issues.

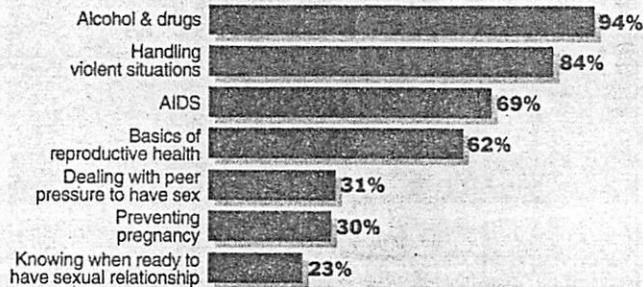
The group plans on working with boys' and girls' clubs across the country, holding town meetings and parent clinics, and encouraging local media to support their effort.

Public-service messages produced by the campaign focus on peer pressure to become sexually active and children's fear about AIDS. One ad depicts a boy struggling to deal with pressures to have sex with his girlfriend, wondering, "Is that what girls are for?" Another shows a child confused and worried that all of her friends would "catch AIDS and die."

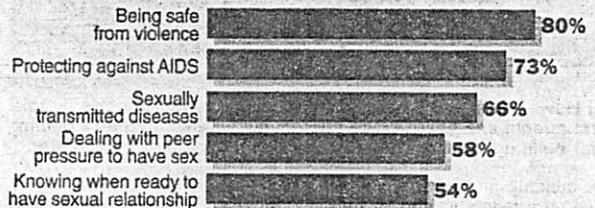
All of the ads encourage parents to talk with their children and to call the campaign's toll-free number — (800)

TOUGH ISSUES TO TALK ABOUT

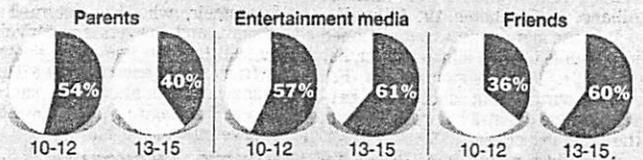
The percentage of parents of 8- to 12-year-olds who say they've talked with their children about these issues:



The percentage of 10- to 12-year-olds who say they want to know about these issues:



The percentage of 10- to 12-year-olds and 13- to 15-year-olds who say children their age find out "a lot" about tough issues from each source:



Sources: Kaiser Family Foundation, Children Now and the Advertising Council, 1996

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CHILD-44 — to get a free guide to help them.

The study, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, consisted of three surveys of a total of 1,961 people. The margins of error for the surveys ranged from 8 to 9 percentage points.

The Kaiser Family Foundation is a non-profit independent health-care agency and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries. Children Now is a non-partisan advocate for poor or at-risk children. The non-profit Advertising Council produces public-service ads.