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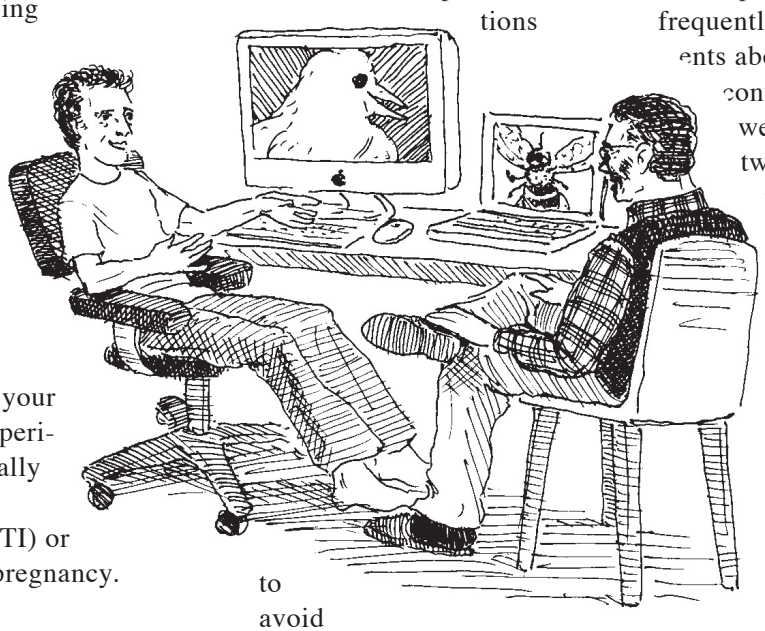
"The Birds and the Bees" in the 21st century

By Zai Divecha

Explaining "the birds and the bees" can be uncomfortable or even downright mortifying for both parents and teens. However, these conversations actually reduce teens' likelihood of having unsafe sex. So get the facts, update your sex talk for the 21st century, and help reduce the chance that your teen will experience a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or unplanned pregnancy.



The Facts

As much as we don't like to think of 14-year-olds as sexual beings, the research shows that a large proportion of teens are sexually active. Here in San Francisco, over a quarter of all high school freshmen have had sex, and by senior year, that proportion rises to two-thirds.

Unfortunately, many of them fail to take precautions to avoid STIs or pregnancy. Nationwide, only 60% of high school students reported using a condom the last time they had sex, and at any given time, one in four teenage girls has an STI. And California's annual teen pregnancy rate, while lower than it has been in decades, is 70 pregnancies per 1,000 girls: not insignificant, given that pregnancy is preventable.

"The Talk"

As intimidating as these statistics may be, take comfort in the fact that you have the power to influence your child's sexual risk behaviors. A study found that teens who reported talking frequently with parents about sex, birth control, and STIs were roughly twice as likely to use condoms during sex as compared to teens who did not have such conversations.

And the earlier the conversations, the better: another study found that when parents discussed condom use with teens prior to becoming sexually active, teens were three times as likely to use condoms as teens whose parents never discussed condoms—or whose parents discussed condoms after they became sexually active.

Some parents avoid the topic because they believe that their

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How do you Diffuse a Classic Power-struggle? (with non-defensive communication, of course!)

by Kathleen Bisaccia

Question: How long does it take for a teen to get defensive? Answer: Within seconds. How long does it take **you** to get defensive in response to someone else? Answer: Probably just as fast. EVERYONE gets defensive. Our society has taught us to communicate in a war-like manner. This was the topic of Sharon Ellison's recent presentation entitled "Powerful Non-Defensive Communication," an event sponsored by the Parent's Coalition of Bay Area High Schools (www.parentscoalition.net).

Over the years of studying the subject, Sharon has learned that defensiveness is an automatic response that is hugely psychological and often is a cover-up for hurt, pain or anxiety.

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teens dread "the talk." In reality, a study found that more teens would prefer to learn about contraception from parents than from classes, doctors, health centers, or even friends. While it's true that teens are often reluctant to talk about sex, a survey showed that it's largely because they fear the reactions and assumptions of their parents.

To preempt some of the anxiety and eye-rolling, make it a conversation rather than a lecture: let your teen ask questions, resist the urge to jump to conclusions about your teen's sex life, and assure him or her that you'll be there to answer questions in the future.

Online Tools

Now that you have the research to back you up, it's time to update your approach for the 21st century. Though reports of cyberbullying and online privacy violations make the Internet sound like your family's worst enemy, it might just be your best ally when it comes to preparing for a talk with your teen. There are a couple of ways that you can leverage online tools to supplement your conversations about sexual health.

Because norms about sex, relationships, and health behaviors evolve from generation to generation, you can use the Internet to better understand the sexual culture of teens today. Check out Sex, Etc. (www.sexetc.org) to get a feel for the questions and issues teens grapple with regarding relationships, sexual orientation, dating violence, mental health, and more. This website, operated by Rutgers University, features the voices and opinions of teens themselves and consistently offers high-quality advice for how to safely navigate the complex world of human sexuality.

"So get the facts, update your sex talk for the 21st century, and help reduce the chance that your teen will experience a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or unplanned pregnancy"

Another way to use the Internet to your advantage is to follow up your sex talk with a handful of online resources. Though over half of all teens have gone online to research a health issue on their own, you can support their efforts to find accurate answers to their questions in an anonymous, low-stress setting. MTV's hip and empowering website It's Your Sex Life (www.itsyoursexlife.com) features practical advice for talking with a partner about sexual health and information about where to get tested for STIs.

For girls considering (or already using) birth control, Bedsider (www.bedsider.org) is a great resource run by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Its slick interface makes it easy to compare methods. They'll even send your teen witty, customizable reminders to take her birth control pill—via text message.

It can be terrifying for parents to step back and watch their children enter the world of sexuality, intimacy, and relationships. But sexual health is one area in which parents have some influence. The conversations that you have now with your child about sex, birth control, and condoms will empower him or her to make healthier decisions about sex in the future. So brush up on your Web 2.0 skills, take a deep breath, and start the conversation. **P**

"It can be terrifying for parents to step back and watch their children enter the world of sexuality, intimacy, and relationships"

Zai Divecha attended Lick-Wilmerding High School and is currently a graduate student at the Yale School of Public Health. Her master's thesis is on adolescent sexual health and social media.

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When a person gets defensive, a "Fight or Flight" state of mind is triggered and all capacity for complex problem solving disappears. The brain shuts down and the amygdala (part of brain that relates to anger) takes over. This state can last 20 minutes to one hour before it can recover! The person's look or tone of voice can make us instantly defensive and is, Ellison says, always related to something you remember from the past.

Why do we do it? Defensiveness is a power struggle and can function as an addiction. We are in the midst of an adrenaline rush and want to "win" an argument. Similar to other addictions, we care more about winning the argument than we do about the other person. Human's communication system has been built on the rules of war (can anyone relate with regard to their teen?). We put up a "wall" to defend ourselves and inadvertently prompt defensiveness all the time. In a "war model" we give the non-cooperative person the power. Non-defensive communication, on the other hand, brings brings people to a neutral place of "safety" so that they are probably more willing to share their thoughts and feelings.

How can you shift the conversation to diffuse the power struggle? Ellison advises that you "change the ingredients of your conversation recipe." There are three things you can do in this direction (1) change your tone and body language; (2) be curious and question; and (3) turn the question around.

Tone and Body Language: is critically important. Ellison advises losing the "defensive posture" when you ask questions of your teen. Don't say: "what's the matter" or "why did you do this" with a scowl on your face. Many people are unaware of their facial expressions and how powerful that can be. Practice looking in the mirror if you have to. Be present, be relaxed and neutral in your communication. When you ask a question, use good eye contact without negative facial expression. Also, attempt to ask questions in a more neutral manner. If you say: "what is going on here?" or "why did you do this?" most humans will resist taking accountability. If you ask a question by including the statement "just wondering," it is less threatening. Do not ask leading questions, because it sounds like you have a "hidden agenda". You should not have an agenda, only an interest in communicating. With regard to tone, parents should practice lowering the tone of the question. Normally when we ask a question the tone goes up at the end of the question or sentence, but it works better to do the opposite.

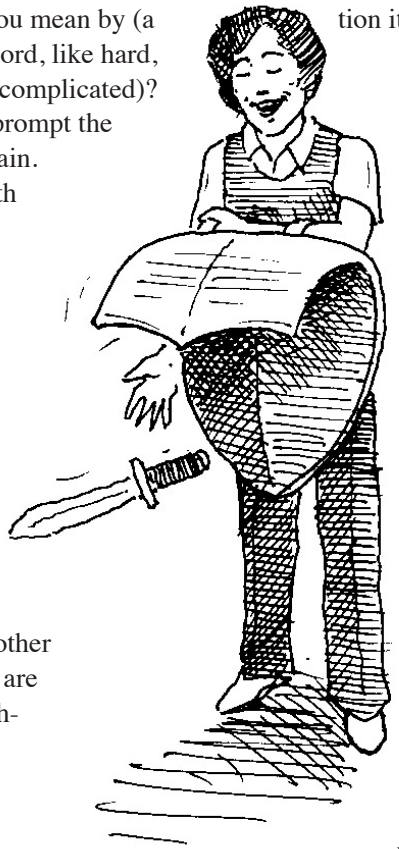
"Be present, be relaxed and neutral in your communication. When you ask a question, use good eye contact without negative facial expression."

Be Curious and Question: Sometimes we get angry with our children when they cause us to worry about them. Giving up and not exploring your concerns can be defensive too. Ask yourself: If I were truly curious, what would I want to know? Ellison relates this example. A father went to his son and told him he was worried about the son's failing in school and drug use, and wanted to change his communication style (using non defensive communication) so he might help his son. In response, his son sneered at parent and said, "Ha! You'll never change!" Upon hearing this, instead of getting angry, parent went away and thought about it and came back and asked his son: "When you said I will never change, were you also afraid that you would not change either?" His son was taken aback and started to cry because this was exactly what he thought and could not express until he felt safe to do so.

Parents should ask for clarification by saying: "Are you saying that _____? Do you think it makes sense for you to do _____ or not? Do you think _____ has anything to do with it?" Another approach that often works is: (1) Say: What I hear you saying is _____, (2) Say: What **I see** is _____(the reality) and (3) Say: What your conclusion is about what's going on.

Turn the question around: Parents should stop making assumptions about what is happening. Often we make assumptions that are wrong and get upset without really knowing why someone does what they do. For example, a parent assumes his son is being rude because he is suddenly wearing headphones all the time and listening to music. Parent says (with angry tone): "why are you wearing your headset all the time when you come to the table for dinner? Son could get defensive, but if the parent asks instead in a non-defensive way, this will allow the son to be open, honest and vulnerable, and to tell the parent that their son is feeling really stressed and this is his way of coping. Another tool is to remember to ask: "What do you mean by (a particular word, like hard, stressed, or complicated)? That helps prompt the teen to explain.

With regard to power-struggle situations, do not try to control how the other person responds. When you try to control the other person, you are just entrenching them in their own resistance. If you prompt defenses by trying to convince someone of your argument, you do more harm and make things worse. If you don't try to convince, then the other person has the freedom to make their own decision.



Also in a heated situation, if you ask a teen to do something and they act upset and disrespectful as a result, you can say: "It's OK for you to be mad, but I expect you to do what I asked you to do with a respectful attitude." Parent can tell if teen turns it around or not. You may have to say: "I don't feel a genuine relaxed respectful attitude, so wait until you can do this." Lastly, do not go after a person who is walking away (that person has the power) but if you don't follow, they will turn around and give the power back to you.

When using non-defensive communication it's harder for the other person to get defensive. We often have assumptions about others but don't ask the questions for clarification; this results in prejudice. Non-defensive questions make the other person "think" and this often helps them resolve things. If we don't have curiosity, then we can't make this style of communication work. Remember that you cannot talk the other person out of being defensive, but you can change YOUR behavior and this can ultimately be effective in changing the dynamic. **P**

BOOK REVIEW

MY TEENAGE WEREWOLF: A mother, a daughter, a Journey Through the Thicket of Adolescence (Lauren Kessler).

Reviewed by Kathleen Bisaccia

I checked this book out of the main library many moons ago. I liked the title, and that same morning I had been in yet another exasperated conversation with my teen, so I thought it would be the book for me. Little did I know how much I would LOVE this book. $9.00 in overdue fines later I would not be turning it back in unless I had to. This book is one of those rare books that I would like to reprint in its entirety for this book review, because it is nearly impossible to distill all of its best parts.

Kessler's book is about her relationship with her 13-year old daughter Lizzie, and the year and half period that Kessler decided to try and figure out the early teen mind. Kessler did what not many parents (or their teens) could live through without a breakdown - she completely immersed herself in Lizzie's life. She went to school with Lizzie, sitting in on her seventh- and eighth-grade classes; she attended (and sometimes participated in) Lizzie's wrestling and track practices; and she served as a yoga instructor for a week at summer camp.

Following Kessler through the hallways at her daughter's middle school was like dropping in to a pensieve – it was so descriptive and so real that I felt like I was following the two into class. Kessler describes the teenage years as "the inevitable edging away" and advises parents to observe this edging away with support and with the reality that our teens' issues are not the same as our issues were as teens. While admittedly slanted toward teen girls, Kessler's observations are applicable to teen boys too:

- Middle school relationships can be brutal, especially for girls. One of the middle school counselors Kessler interviews in the book calls the girl relationships "merciless."
- Hormones are really real. For pre-teens, small emotional glitches in the day "can feel like out-of-control roller coaster rides." As parents, we've all experienced this (for example, one unnamed child I know once asked me if I had a hairclip. My simple response was "what kind do you want" for which I received a "NEVER MIND" and a major eye roll
- Social lives are critical. Kessler very accurately describes the "5 minute day" that takes place each hour between classes in the hallway, and at the lockers. According to Kessler, "entire soap operas are played out in the five-minute breaks: friends fight and reconcile, tears are shed, boyfriends are gained or lost, alliances are made, secrets shared, confidences broken."
- Teenagers (even the 13 year old ones) think and talk about sex. Yes, be very scared. Kessler observed a lot of interest in this area, and although most of the teens had very little interest in real physical exploration, the talked a lot about sex, "sometimes in graphic detail, like it's no big deal." Kessler shares funny insights about this, including one laugh out loud paragraph about her conversation with Lizzie following Lizzie's revelation that she had just "made out with a boy."
- Whether we like it or not, the online world (Facebook, MySpace, videogaming, chat boards) is their world. Nature only exists when the parents force them to experience it.
- Teens need something to succeed at. Like we all do, teens need something they can feel good about, whether it is sports or dancing, music, school or art. And even if it drives them crazy sometimes.

At the end of the day, I can say without a doubt I recommend this book to any parent of a preteen or teenager, especially a girl. As for me, I'm going to go buy it and read it again. **P**

Kathleen Bisaccia is the mother of two daughters in San Francisco, and is the editor of this newsletter.

Coalition Mission

"To support, educate, and inspire parents of adolescents in order to promote the health and safety of our youth."

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Readers are encouraged to submit letters to the editor, ideas for articles or articles themselves.

Please direct your inquiries regarding the Coalition to parentscoalition@gmail.com

HOT DATES!

Upcoming Parents Coalition Forum:

April 25, 2011: Michael Simon, Founder of Practical Help for Parents
"Learned Optimism: Helping your teens when things just don't seem to go right"
Location: International High School