

## Talking About Puberty & Sexuality with Your Middle School Child

### **Explore your Own Attitudes & Values First: TAKE A STAND!**

Kids who can speak openly and honestly about sex with parents are less likely to engage in sex and high-risk behaviors. Remember, your honesty gives them a place to come home to. Gaps in communication cause kids to fill in the holes with inaccurate information. So much of what is transmitted to your teen is absent of values. Use this opportunity to share the importance of values, particularly your family values. Take a stand! Let your values be their excuse and support to make a choice they are proud of.

### **Explore Your Own Actions:**

Kids whose parents participate in risky behaviors are 4-5 times more likely to participate in risky behaviors (texting while driving, speeding, drinking, smoking, multiple sex partners). Also, more likely to fall victim to the risky shift – the propensity to participate in actions they alone would not consider – but when influenced by group dynamics, sway to high risk choices.

**Become a mini expert:** Provide accurate information uncharged with emotion. Know your STDs and BIRTH CONTROL methods. Look at websites your child has explored – you will find a very mixed bag – but in exploring you will be able to offer good direction.

**Start Early & Use A POSITIVE Approach:** Use opportunities with your oldest to speak with your younger children. Kids unanimously report that by the time their parents had “The Talk” they had already figured it out – usually through friends and media. Remember, only 7% of communication is verbal, the rest we wear! In terms of remaining positive, think long and hard about how you want your child approaching sex. The more we fail to talk, the more sexual activity becomes the forbidden fruit.

### **Engage, don't Enrage!**

Kids don't want these discussions to focus on the negative – or the latest shock-value gossip. They need you to have faith in them. They don't need to worry about your emotions.

- Take the initiative to communicate – don't expect them to start
- Remember, ½ of communicating is LISTENING
- Brevity will encourage future discussions
- A healthy split between undivided and divided attention is key
- Start vague in the early years so they do not shy away from turning to you
- Keep it coming on a regular basis – then the specifics fall nicely into place
- Limit judgments, share feelings! Do not Over-EMOTE
- Avoid ultimatums – even when you really don't approve of his/her choices

A healthy combination of ACTING – INTERACTING – REACTING works well.

**Intimacy & Intercourse -What Makes a Healthy Relationship?:** Teens often equate intimacy with sex at a time when their hormones are peaking. Rather than exploring deep emotional attachment, they dive in and assume that if they engage in the physical act, the emotional attachment will follow. This is your opportunity to promote your values and the importance of deep emotional commitment, loyalty, teamwork, friendship, humor, imperfections, forgiveness, and the list goes on – if you want their future relationships to be long-lasting. They need to know how to abstain, and not lose face. Ask your kids how they feel about possessiveness. Ask if the captain of the lacrosse team would make a great dad/mom? What qualities combine to create a healthy relationship?

**Do not delegate Dad to the Boys, and Mom to the Girls** from plumbing to sex. Sharing the load is a great building block for future teamwork in relationships. Don't delegate to media or peers.

**Don't Let Media do Your Job:** Although a great ice-breaker, media has become the babysitter and teacher of sexual norms, particularly with their access to uncensored Internet. Kids point out how frequently cast members have casual sex on a variety of shows. No building of a relationship (dating) before jumping into bed. Music lyrics are kids sexual expression – it's normal, although as kids point out – it sets a definite pace and mood for action. Kids who watch & listen to high sexual content media initiate activity earlier and with more partners.

**Impact of Social Media on adolescent sexual exposure and experimentation:** Social media creates an entirely new playing field, particularly with regard to uncensored exposure and intense visuals. Recent evidence raises concerns about media's effects on aggression, early and overly aggressive sexual behavior, substance use, disordered eating, and academic difficulties – as social media abundantly portrays the intensified, glorified and desensitized version of anything that kids can type in or say aloud to Siri. With an average **7 hours/day** dedicated to social media in some form – at least 1/3 of that time is entertainment/leisure.

### **2015 research findings:**

- *Adolescents are using these communication tools primarily to reinforce existing relationships, both with friends and romantic partners (not meet strangers). Studies show this is intensifying verbal acts and romantic interests that youth would not feel comfortable sharing aloud or in person.*
- *Desensitization is primary factor – violence, violent sexual acts, visual portrayal of unnatural acts, pornographic information readily available, belief that everyone is participating*
- *Girls with unhealthy body image concerns, self-destructive tendencies are most vulnerable*
- *Boys who have been bullied, or are sensitive to the words/actions of peers are also more intensely and negatively impacted by social media*

### **So what do we do with the barrage of Social Media:**

- Monitor with friend group – use fellow parents as your allies. Share information, particularly when it is disturbing (use the gut check).
- Establish rules of the road that others in your friend group are willing to enforce – no phones at party/social gathering/sleepover, limited gaming time
- Establish and enforce bedtime boundaries, after school use (pass in to mom/dad at 10 pm)
- Limit overall use to under \_\_\_ minutes – reject the notion that “my homework is done” (recent research at independent schools with strict social media boundaries – homework accomplished in half the time or less)
- Experience and discuss what happens when phones are taken away – you might be surprised
- Don't judge – although it will remain in your mind, readily forgive past indiscretions (Recall note-passing, phone calls that we might not have wanted adults to hear/see)

Meg Domino, PhD, MPH, MCHES  
Executive Director NC CARES  
[mdomino@newcanaancares.org](mailto:mdomino@newcanaancares.org)