

Teens Having Sex:

Teaching About Risks and Consequences

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One of the biggest threats to young people today is their sexuality. Sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, HIV and AIDS, and economic disability are only some of the risks associated with sexual activity among teenagers. For young people to become adults, they need to be capable of weighing choices and making good decisions. Teaching boys to become men and girls to become women means teaching them that everything they do has consequences.

However, too many young people think they are invincible. We know this because we were once young. Teenagers think consequences are for someone else. They often fail to realize that some consequences are permanent. Teens need to know and understand that failure to negotiate the risks of premature sex exposes them to consequences that last forever. Just ask them to consider this:

- Having sex puts people at risk of contracting herpes simplex virus, a sexually transmitted disease (STD) for which there is no cure. The rate of herpes infection is highest among teenagers. The herpes virus is extremely contagious, which means it is easy to catch and easy to spread to someone else. Intimate contact with someone who has herpes can cause pain, discomfort, inconvenience, and shame for a lifetime.
- There is also teen pregnancy. Avoiding pregnancy is not only the girl's responsibility; it is also the boy's. All it takes is one sexual encounter, and dreams of having a normal teen life—like taking part in extra curricular activities, going out with friends, even attending the senior prom—can all be shattered. Instead, a young person may have to work at some menial task to earn money for pampers and formula. Chances of going to college can even be compromised; their future is put in jeopardy.
- Perhaps the biggest risk in having sex is HIV/AIDS—the number one killer of young African American men ages 25–44. Many of these adults were infected as teenagers. Having sex with someone who is infected HIV but who does not look, act, or feel sick puts one at great risk of catching this deadly disease that has no cure.

When teaching our teens to manage risks and understand consequences, it is important to conduct those instructions in an environment that empowers. Although our society focuses much attention on sexual activity, minority communities can and should focus their attention on healthful behavior.

In many minority communities, girls are taught from an early age to value their virginity. At the same time, our boys are taught that the loss of their virginity is a sign of manhood. There is something wrong with this picture. If waiting until marriage is the best and only way to go for girls, then boys too might benefit waiting. Encouraging boys to be sexually active while teaching girls to wait, sends conflicting messages that can lead to unintended and permanent consequences. If boys, as well as girls, waited until marriage to become sexually active, we would likely see reductions in teen pregnancy, STD's, and HIV/AIDS in minority communities.

Abstinence is not a popular point of view today. In fact, many experienced and well-meaning adults question abstinence as a realistic point of view. However, in this environment of permanent and deadly sexually transmitted diseases, it is time for a radical change in our approach to sexuality. Abstinence should be promoted as an acceptable choice.

Informing our sons and daughters of the consequences of having sex can help them make the right choices. In addition, we must keep young people busy and help them to develop the strength to conquer peer pressure, resist temptation, and pave their own paths. We must engage ourselves in our teenagers' lives and preoccupy them with after school and weekend activities. And, we must know who their friends are, where they hang out, and what they are doing when they are not in our presence.

Finally, with young people being young people, they need to know—and be reminded frequently—that life is more than the moment. Talk to young people. Teach them how to be responsible adults. Be to them what you want them to be to society. ❖

