

***EVERYTHING YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT TEEN SEXUALITY...  
BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK***

*Notes from April 2014 event*

As part of National Health Week, B-PEN sponsored a parent forum entitled ***EVERYTHING YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT TEEN SEXUALITY...BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK***, led by Planned Parenthood Director of Parent Education Amy Cody. The evening event addressed how the hyper-sexuality of today's culture and unrestricted media access are impacting the impressionable, still-developing teen brain, highlighting what parents need to know to encourage healthy relationships and offering tips for connecting with adolescents on this tricky subject matter.

Taking up where the school-sponsored middle school presentation, "Let's Be Honest," left off, the program reinforced the message that parents are still their kids' primary sexuality educators. Parents need to initiate conversations about healthy sexuality early and talk frequently about the risks and consequences involved with sexual activity, even though it's hard to think of our vulnerable children as sexual beings, acknowledging that they are growing up and separating. Teens talk a lot about freedom, independence, experimentation - - that's adolescence in nutshell. Use those themes -- risk and consequence, freedom with responsibility.

The brain's frontal lobe doesn't quite fuse until the mid-20s, so adolescents are prone to risky behavior without fully appreciating the consequences. Kids often don't seem to know right from wrong with respect to some sexual behavior, so parents need to be careful not to be too judgmental, which can shut conversation down. We need to make it a conversation and dialogue rather than a lecture and follow their cues. We need to help them understand how to navigate these issues without them thinking their parents are from the Dark Ages.

The culture has changed since we were that age, with insidious violence against women, hyper sexuality, objectification, pressure for women to be sexually available. Girls are turning themselves into sexual objects, posting selfies, sexting. Often their value as women is based on what they're willing to do. It's important to integrate boys into the conversation about this.

Cody recommends both parents get involved in conversations for perspective on issues like self esteem. Research says teens want to hear from parents about sexuality more than from their peers or media. 87% of teens said they thought they would delay sex longer if they could have open, honest conversations with their parents. Using facts and numbers can sometimes help adolescents make sense of what's happening. For instance:

- One and four teens that are sexually active between 18-24 will contract a sexually transmitted infection (STI)
- Pregnancy is down among teens
- Condom use at BHS is down (B-PEN's [Youth Survey](#) has much more information)

Cody describes both sex and sexuality as continuums. **Sex is both the gender** someone is born into – male, female, or somewhere in between – **and behavior**, anything that stimulates erotic sexual feelings.

**Sexuality is who we are drawn to** – spiritually, emotionally, physically. It impacts how we dress, talk, feel about ourselves, and present ourselves to world, including gender identity. It is often influenced by family, religion, community, outside expectations, messages of how we should act. It is what it means to be human and have relationships, a sense of self worth. The conversation gets very rich around high school age. Cody stressed that there is room for parents' own attitudes, feelings, and values, but parents should make sure they offer confidentiality and refrain from making assumptions about the their kids. Parents should use each other as resources and supports to find out what teens are up to, what guidelines they find effective.

### **Tips and strategies**

- Cody suggests approaching conversations calmly, positively. Instead of saying, "I don't want you having sex until..." she suggests asking, "How do you think people know when ready to have kids?"
- Consider the most important messages we want to tell our kids, what we want them to know about sexuality, and keep focused on those.
- Validate and normalize what kids are going through – the confusion, excitement, hormones, fear, desire. Sharing stories can be effective. Reassure them that they are not the only one experiencing intense feelings. Offer to be a safety net.
- Share a range of perspective and ideas – some people do this or that, some families think this or that, etc.
- Ask them what they think -- open-ended questions can be good conversation starters.
- Keep a sense of humor, let things roll off your back, develop a tough skin.
- Watch TV with them, listen to music in the car, try to understand what they're interested in, why they like something or not, what they think, being alert for springboards to teachable moments. Talk about fantasy vs. reality, which can help kids understand pornography, for example, which doesn't show real relationships and how real people react to each other.
- Listen more -- keep your ears open, then circle back later for a deeper conversation. You don't have to react in the moment and pin them down. Sometimes they're just looking for reassurance. You can think more about what want to say. But sometimes you also may want to meet them in the moment, and if you don't know how to respond, say, "That's a great question," to validate and normalize. Then you can say you need to think a little bit about it and turn the table. "So what do you think about that? What have you heard?"
- Sometimes it's helpful not to look at each other (at a ballgame, on a walk, etc.). Other opportunities to communicate – magazine articles, text messages, news items, use examples in the world around you. If you get push back, just keep trying. "I do this because I'm your parent and want you to be informed."
- Understand the facts of sexual behavior risks – they think they know more than they actually do. Make sure you are well informed and that they are aware of plenty of resources, from school nurses to reputable websites (including B-PEN.org and PlannedParenthood.org)
- It's OK to say, "My choice is that you wait much longer to have sex because you're probably not ready for the emotional and physical consequences. Consider – there are 250-500 million sperm in ejaculation, and it only takes one, so think about delaying or using protection consistently and correctly. And if you can't go buy your own condoms, you're not ready for sex."
- You don't have to share info about your own sexual behavior. You can say you're not comfortable, "I'm more interested in how you're going to know when it's the right time." Turn it back to the adolescent.
- It's important to have these conversations with ALL kids. Research shows that LGBTQ kids who might have internalized homophobia may have higher rates of pregnancy because they're trying to prove they're straight. As a parent, try to be gender inclusive and not pigeon hole anyone. For example, instead of asking, "Do you have a boyfriend?" try, "Do you have a partner?"

- Talk about sexting (sending sexually suggestive images/words through social media), by asking “Would you do this in a crowded auditorium?” That’s what it’s like when kids send out photos, which go viral very quickly. 39% of all teens have sexted, leaving them open to legal issues with pornography, cyberbullying, harassment laws. And tell them if they get a sexting message, passing it on can be distribution of pornography.
- Give them rules of the road for social media use. Be aware of what’s out there, and don’t be in denial. (For example, there is a new app call SIP which sends anonymous material to any one in the area.) Help kids understand their responsibilities, that virtual and digital use still has concrete risks. Try using people in media as cautionary tales (Anthony Wiener, etc.)
- Think of the CERTS model for healthy relationships:
  - Consent (needs to be mutual, sober, awake, enthusiastic, verbal – if mixed messages, slow down)
  - Equality
  - Respect
  - Trust
  - Safety