

# Safe Sex and Teens

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As a Planned Parenthood educator in the early 1980s, I often began my classroom contraceptive presentations, "Today we are going to talk about contraception. Before we do that, it is important to recognize that only about half of you are currently sexually active, and many of you won't need this information for a long time. It is important that you get this information now before you need it and so that you can share it with a family member or friend."

I would continue, "There are many ways for people to share sexual pleasure. There are kissing, and talking, and hand-holding. . . now let's talk about birth control." I always knew what I was leaving out, and I suspect that many of the students did too. Although I had been asked to talk about each of the methods of contraception and was often able to be quite explicit in doing so, I knew that the teacher and the school might have been aghast had I talked about the complete range of sexual behaviors.

As I have conducted training workshops for professionals around the country, I usually include a section on values clarification around adolescent sexual behavior. Two areas are always particularly problematic. One has to do with what the appropriate age is for a teenager to first have sexual intercourse. (This is often correlated with the age the participant first had sexual intercourse.) The other is reactions to the statement, "We should teach teens about oral sex and mutual masturbation in order to help them delay the onset of sexual intercourse and its resulting consequences." Educators are often quite vehement in their opposition to actually talking with young people about sexual behaviors.

Such silence often helps reinforce the message that one goes from kissing and hugging to activities that require the use of contraceptive methods, i.e., vaginal intercourse. The message our young people see in the movies and on television is the same—characters kiss and in the next scene they are in bed, usually relaxing after they have had intercourse. We only rarely see any type of courting or sex play. We are teaching our children that you either stop at kissing or you "do it."

Little wonder then that research studies have shown that many of our teenagers are engaging in sexual intercourse without even removing their clothes. Many young women and young men report that they have intercourse without any type of foreplay, and countless young women have told me in counseling sessions that they have never had an orgasm with their sex partner.

As discussed in the Peterson article, the cries for total abstinence for teens have done little to change teen behaviors.

In fact, a recent study by the Alan Guttmacher Institute shows that sexual activity among unmarried women has actually increased over the past five years, despite the AIDS scare campaigns and "just say no" programs for our young people. I cannot help but wonder what programs that teach that sex equates with death are doing to our young people's developing sense of sexual identity. As Dr. Joseph A. Cantania, a scientist at the University of California at San Francisco, said at a recent meeting at the University of Vermont, "Bang, you're dead—what kind of message is that? We're creating a generation that will be going to sex therapists for years."

As a society, we need to begin to accept that the vast majority of young people engage in some type of sexual activity during adolescence, and only some of that activity is sexual intercourse. Even among the 20-30% of teens who are still virgins at 19, almost all have experimented with sex. Forming a sexual identity is a critical developmental task of adolescence.

Colleagues and I have fantasized about a national "petting project" for teenagers. The object would not be to increase petting among teenagers, but to help them learn courting behaviors and to, once again, give teens time to learn slowly about their sexuality. I am not advocating a return to the days of technical virginity, but rather to an unhurried and unpressured norm of teen sexual activity.

Many of my friends and colleagues report fond memories of having limits on their adolescent sexual behavior. The "bases" dictated how far one would go and in what kind of relationship. There was time for hours and hours of kissing without the pressure to "go further." More advanced sexual activities were related to the development of intimacy.

Today's teens also need to have that opportunity for unpressured discovery of sexual feelings and responses. We need to tell teens that the safest sex doesn't necessarily mean no sex, but rather behaviors that have no possibility of causing a pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease. A partial list of safe sex practices for teens could include:

- Talking
- Flirting
- Dancing
- Hugging
- Kissing
- Necking
- Massaging
- Caressing
- Undressing each other
- Masturbation alone
- Masturbation in front of a partner
- Mutual masturbation

Teens could surely come up with their own list of activities. By helping teens explore the full range of safe sexual behaviors, we may help to raise a generation of adults that do not equate sex with intercourse, or intercourse with vaginal orgasm, as the goal of sex. Rather, we can help teens understand that sex is more than intercourse and that abstinence from intercourse does not mean abstinence from all intimate expression.