

# Teens & Sexuality

By Kia Smith

*A 2005 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study stated that 47% of high school students had engaged in sexual intercourse and 14% had engaged with four or more partners. While the number of teens having sex has significantly decreased since 1991, teenage sexual relationships have become more acceptable in our society. But are our youth truly ready for the responsibility that accompanies a sexual relationship?*



**T**eens and sexuality can be a very complicated subject, especially when you are a parent whose teen is exploring their sexuality. To ensure that your teen makes the most responsible choices, you must first have an understanding of your teen and his or her sexuality so that you can offer them guidance and answers.

## **Understanding Sexuality**

Sexuality doesn't just magically appear during puberty or the teenage years. From a very early age, children

are curious about their bodies. Babies often touch their private parts while toddlers may be intrigued by the differences between male and female bodies. During early elementary school, kids may exhibit crushes on other students, and between the ages of 8 and 12, most youth enter puberty. This is when hormones begin changing. Girls began developing breasts and start their menstruation cycle, while boys' penises and testicles begin to develop and their voices begin to change.

As your children begin to develop sexually, it is important that you have open and honest conversations about sex and sexuality. This will help them develop values and ideals that align with yours. Helping your teen understand and control his or her sexuality will ensure they make better decisions in regards to their bodies. Below are five steps that will help ensure you that your teen makes responsible decisions regarding their sexuality.

## How Can I Help My Teen Control Their Sexuality?

### 1) Let them know that you expect them to be responsible sexually

If you want your kids to abstain from sex until marriage, tell them that's what you expect of them. If abstinence isn't your ultimate goal for your teen, tell them what your goal is. Let them know that you expect for them not to be promiscuous, not to become pregnant, not to contract a sexually transmitted disease and to always be responsible with their bodies and the bodies of their partners.

"Kids need concrete counsel. You can't be abstract," explained Joneen Mackenzie, executive director of the Wait Training, an abstinence and relationship program.

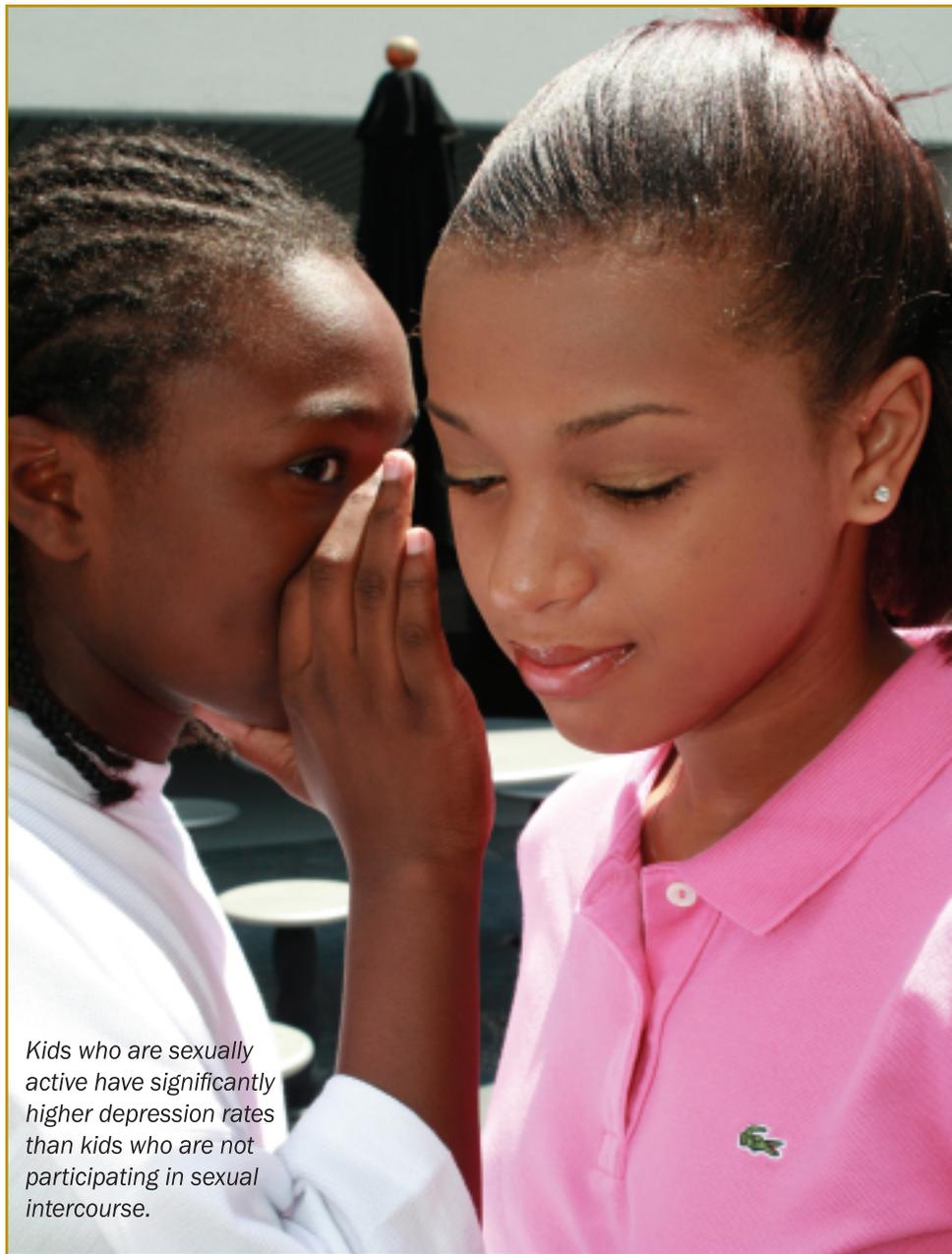
If abstinence is ideal, Mackenzie recommends you "tell your kids that you expect them to have the best sex by waiting until they are married. Don't talk about sex in a negative way."

If you simply want your teen to be responsible in their sexual activity, encourage them to always use protection and limit the number of partners in which they engage. This could prevent them from building negative relationship habits and having to deal with the consequences of bad decisions later in life.

"This attitude that I'm going to sow my wild oats as a teen then, I'm going to settle down and start a family doesn't work because you are setting up your habits as a teen. If you have 31 flavors when you're a teenager, I can tell you vanilla when you're an adult is not going to cut it," Mackenzie says.

### 2) Give teens the tools to meet your expectations

You wouldn't expect a contractor to build a house without tools, so you can't expect your teen to live up to your expectations without tools. Make sure your child has the knowledge, support and materials needed



*Kids who are sexually active have significantly higher depression rates than kids who are not participating in sexual intercourse.*

to achieve their goals. These tools vary and can include books on sex, STDs, responsibility and abstinence; practical tools like condoms, birth control pills and vaccines; and supportive individuals and groups whom teens can talk and ask questions to openly.

"You need to know the reason to be abstinent," Mackenzie stated. "Nobody's giving the kids what's on the other sides of waiting." According to Mackenzie, abstinence is a triangle with the sides being 1) the benefits of waiting, 2) information on

how to wait and 3) who can support the teen while they're waiting.

It is just as important for sexually active teens to be educated on the proper use of their tools, rather these tools are condoms, birth control pills or vaccines. Teens should also know the risk factors that accompany using these preventative tools.

"If they're sexually active, then they need risk reducers absolutely, but you don't stop there," Mackenzie said. "You give them what they need medi-

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cally and you teach them how to use these devices every single time. You tell them how important it is to use these devices and that they are going to reduce their risk, but they're not going to eliminate the risk."

### 3) Explain the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual consequences of sexual relationships

It's easy to discuss the physical consequence of sex (e.g. STDs, pregnancy, etc.). However, it can be more difficult for you to explain the emotional, mental and spiritual consequences of sexual relationships, especially if you as an adult don't fully understand them. Sit down and talk openly and honestly with your teen. If you can't do so, find a minister, counselor or a close family friend who can.

Participants in Mackenzie's Wait Training program brainstorm to highlight consequences of sexual relationships in their coursework. Teen participants give a number of insightful responses. "They say depression, isolation, disconnection and drama are consequences," Mackenzie recounted. "They continue on with things like academic underachievement and bonding and it takes the relationship to the next level. Further, they list becoming disconnected from their parents, drinking and becoming much more likely to take drugs. They feel like they started sexual encounters and can't stop. They feel pressure because once they sleep with someone and it gets around, now they're being pressured by other people."

If teens understand the various consequences of sexual relationships, they will be more likely to delay their participation in sexual activity or even practice abstinence until marriage.

### 4) Practice what you preach

Those days of "do what I say and not what I do" are over. Teenagers can spot a hypocrite faster than most

adults...and you don't want to be known as a hypocrite in your child's eyes. If you're single and you don't want your child engaging in premarital sex, then you shouldn't participate in premarital sex either. "Be a good role model. Don't be bringing home partners that you're not married to," Mackenzie encouraged.

If you want your son or daughter to always use protection and birth control and not have children out of wedlock, then you should too. Maybe you haven't always followed these rules but start fresh today. Don't dwell on things done in the past. If questioned by your child, acknowledge the mistakes and mishaps you have made. However, make it clear that you now have new standards and you expect them to follow them as well.

### 5) Remember that your teens are still kids

While your teen may be participating or considering grown-up activities, in reality they are not mature enough or responsible enough to deal with the consequences of their actions. Encourage them to wait until they are older and more mature so they will not later regret the decisions they made as a teen.

"People under the age of 25 take more risks," Mackenzie explained. "The prefrontal cortex on a teen's brain is the last thing to develop and that's where decisions are made. That's where impulsivity comes in."

According to Dr. Jay Giedd, a practicing child and adolescent psychiatrist and chief of brain imaging in the Child Psychiatry Branch at the National Institute of Mental Health, the prefrontal cortex of youth doesn't fully develop until the mid-20s. This means that until around 25 years of age, most decisions being made by young adults are based on feelings and emotions and not logic. As a parent, it is your job to be the logical thinker in your teens' lives, even when they don't want you to.

Sex and sexuality can be a very

complicated and scary subject, especially for a parent considering their child's sexual activity. It is important to remember that you are the greatest influence in the decisions you make. As long as you remain honest, upfront and direct, you will surely be a positive influence on your teen as you assist them in making healthy, responsible decisions with their bodies. **BH**

## The Consequences of Sexual Relationships

Physical:

- Pregnancy
- Sexually transmitted diseases

Mental:

- Depression
- Isolation
- Disconnection
- Drama
- Academic underachievement
- Confusion
- Disorientation
- Bonding (caused by oxytocin, a neurotransmitter that causes bonding)
- Drinking
- Drug usage
- Inability to stop participating in sexual activities
- Pressure from others

Physical:

- Confusion
- Reactive instead of proactive
- Low self-esteem
- Friends change (e.g. had friends who didn't have sex, now their friends are the ones who have to have sex)
- Anxiety
- Worry
- Depression

Spiritual:

- Guilt
- Disconnection and distance from God
- Begin living a double life