

It's Not Nasty, It's Normal.

Conveying an Accurate Message to Teens About Sex

"Ugh! That's nasty!" This was a statement many students recited in chorus during a middle school sexuality lesson on puberty. Sexual development is a normal part of the teen years. Teens need help understanding their feelings, peer pressure, and how to say "no" if they do not want to have sex. If teens start having sex, they need to know how to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Many people cannot imagine that everyone - children, teens, adults, and the elderly - are sexual beings. Sexuality, though, is much more than sexual intercourse and humans are sexual beings throughout life. While the debate over sex education and how young people learn about sex is a popular topic for policymakers and educators, we can learn a lot from young people. Sex is a staple of news, entertainment and advertising which is often hard to avoid. And teens talk about it often. While many teens wish they could talk to their parents about sex, most feel uncomfortable asking questions. Instead, teens get most of their information about sex from friends, TV, and the movies. Unfortunately, much of what they learn is wrong or does not tell the whole story.

Talking to teens about sensitive issues such as sex and sexuality can be uncomfortable and at times intimidating. Parents may feel intimidated about having "THE TALK" with their children and may think they are saying "too much too soon" but based on the compilation of information from the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, there is no evidence to support this (www.pamf.org/teens/parents/sex/talksex.html). However there are sources that say teens want to talk to their parents about this issue but find themselves at a loss as to how to have the conversation. Some reports even indicate teens who have a strong relationship and talk to their parents about sex are more likely to delay their first sexual encounter and to practice safer sex when they do become sexually active (www.etr.org/recapp, www.socialworkers.org/practice/adolescent_health/ah0202.asp).

No parent has to be an expert on sexuality to have meaningful conversations with their children. When parents talk to and affirm the value of their children, young people are more likely to develop positive, healthy attitudes about themselves. This is also true when the subject is sex. Research shows that positive communication between parents and their children can help young people establish individual values and make healthy decisions.

In talking with your child or teen, it is helpful to:

- Maintain a calm and non-critical atmosphere for discussions
- Keep your sense of humor and don't be afraid to talk about your own discomfort
- Relate sex to love, intimacy, caring, and respect for oneself and one's partner
- Help your child to consider the pros and cons of choices.

For more information about Heart 2 Heart or any BJC School Outreach curriculum, call our program line: 314-286-0460