

## **Sex Talk**

Statistically, in our society the average beginning of sexual activity is now eleven. I don't know why you would be surprised at this unless you haven't been monitoring what your youth are exposed to through; MTV, movies, teen magazines or the news. So, how do you explain to your child that it is in their best interest to be abstinent? Or how to convince a child of the serious emotional and psychological issues that sex initiates not to mention the possible diseases that could be contracted, as well as the complications of parenthood which is a whole different responsibility. Adolescents who make decisions based on their own self interest are certainly not ready to be responsible for a babies needs.

Personally, I did not practice abstinence as a young adolescent. If you understood the whole spectrum, the emotions, and commitment beyond the physical aspect to do so, you were smarter than me. I was curious, demanding, insecure, aggressive, trying to establish my manhood, impress my friends, and over all selfish. That doesn't mean I didn't appreciate or love the girls I was with; it just means that my motivation never included thinking about the physiological or emotional consequences. But this was forty years ago before the current abundance of sexually exploited advertising and media attention.

I find myself with my daughter being fifteen and having a boy friend. And occasionally when she asks to stay out a little later she turns to me and say, " Don't worry, we are not having sex, I don't want to get pregnant, I don't want a bad reputation, I don't want an STD, and I certainly do not want to complicate my life." This is because I have instilled a consequence driven mentality in her since she was able to communicate with me. She has told me repeatedly that I ruined her life, making her think so much, thus stopping her from having fun. I stand proudly guilty as accused.

I'd like to believe that the enclosed interactive technology had an

influence on her, and I'm sure it has. I also have more faith in the fact that she doesn't want to let me down. That she knows I developed this tool so young adolescents would think about consequence as they deal with their individual and personal issues. Either way, I am a lucky father. My wonderful daughter doesn't complicate my life with insanity. I do enough of that on my own. And at some points she has uncomplicated many portions of my life.

As you know, because you were once an adolescent, young people will experiment with sex for a variety of reasons; curiosity, peer pressure, not to be lonely, to prove they are an adult, to be in a relationship, or simply to be liked and accepted. You know this because we all faced these peer related issues when we were a teen. And some of us or our friends made these mistakes. As a parent yourself, you hope and pray your child does not.

The sex talk should certainly be more than reproduction, but it is a hard dialogue, because it is a personal one for your child, and one that forces a parent to ask too many intimate questions that may have no reliable and concrete answers.

Wanting to satisfy my philosophy about open, honest and informative dialogue about life, including sex, between myself and my daughter, I researched existing tools available for educating teenagers about sex. Actually I was hoping I would find an existing product, then I would approach the content specialist with my idea and creating an interactive tool would be easy. But as always, I made it hard on myself. I had criteria and requirements. I was searching for a tool that allowed me to identify that she was not being overcome by any dysfunctions such as peer pressure or low self-esteem. I also wanted a test that undeniably identified to me she was not going to have sex for the wrong reasons. The tool needed to work in a way she would feel comfortable talking about her feelings, and teach her how to identify if she was being induced to have sex by an individual who was dysfunctional or a target of a predator. Other issues I was most concerned about; were her self-image, her evaluation skills, and her knowledge about the consequences of sexual activity at a young age. My hopes were that a strong self-esteem, heightened evaluation

skills, and knowing the consequences would help protect and balance out her emotional and hormonal state.

This made my quest seem almost impossible for two reasons. First being; that most content specialists in this arena were creating pure Abstinence tools. These tools are excellent tools. They maintain not having sex until you are married. This approach certainly has merit, but I also find a bit unrealistic. Any child who is not being reinforced to live this lifestyle on the home front will not stay focused. With constant exposure by television, movies, music, media in general to sexual innuendos, let alone peer pressure, a child is ripe for their own self-expression to take over the best of their judgments. And this doesn't take into any consideration what they see from the adults around them. However, this drive towards pure Abstinence, which once again, has had success, has been spearheaded by a federal grant that insists in its guidelines that any Abstinence training cannot talk about protection, diseases, or pregnancy. Naturally the majority of content specialists in this field created tools that fit into these guidelines. It only makes sense it is their livelihood. They are going to target the funding requirements.

But what about the kids who run on emotions and instant gratification, who feel lonely, who feel insecure? To them a sexual experience can mean a right of enactment, a right of passage, and a way of being accepted. Then consequences take a backseat to social status. I wanted to do the impossible, to create a program that was more powerful than their temptations and personal issues. A tool that intervened and reminded a child in their weakest moments, that they might be making a decision for the wrong reasons. In case, all else failed, and they were overpowered by their personal issues, unwilling to resist their temptations, they would at least be educated in taking the measures to protect themselves.

The second reason has more to do with the vehicles than the message. How does an adult open up a successful line of dialogue with a teen about sex. Yes, it is possible with kids that are attentive, respectful, honest, and Looking for a mentor. Any child who is willing to listen can be reached, but are those the ones who really need the

help?

Being the idealist I am, I was now motivated to invest my own money. I felt the compulsion to create a tool that satisfied my model of sex education. I wanted educators to have an option and parents to have a tool. I started my mission by meeting with content specialists from assorted parts of the country, Louisiana, Maryland, California and New York. The first thing I learned that was surprising, the average age for sexual activity in the country is 11 years of age. The second surprise, sexual education is an industry. Most of these content specialists had the same concern, that if we created a tool that talked about the consequences and responsibilities of pregnancy it would not fit into the grant and therefore not be eligible for the federal grant funding. In my naivety and interest in preventing kids for premature sexual activity, I didn't factor in the intensity of content specialists' ambition for earning money. Personally, I never think in terms of income when creating tools for our youths' future, so I don't understand why people who seem to have others' best interests at heart do either. However, these people are all forced to tailor their activities for grants and the guidelines to keep those grants regardless if they really agree or not.

I had not worked directly with the Florida Department of Education, but I was in Tallahassee for meeting and casually requested to meet with the person in charge of sex education for the state. Luckily, she was free from other meetings, and we had the opportunity to talk about my ideas and the problem I was facing to find uninhibited content specialist to work with. She recommended one of the content specialists who Florida had worked with and who she thought would compliment my ideas. That person was Dr. Marion Howard of Emory University, Atlanta, and founder of the teen center at Grady Hospital, Atlanta. I didn't waste time, I called her immediately, and very quickly I found myself in her office with her associate Marie Mitchell RN. Dr. Howard is well known as a content specialist throughout the country, had written a number of books, and is totally committed to helping the youth of America. She was also quick to reassure me that she believed that teaching the consequences of pregnancy was important. I explained my concept and was immediately questioned

on where we should begin.

My idea was to create a non-confrontational, non-threatening tool with adolescents sharing with other adolescents the emotional and psychological consequences of their sexual curiosity and activities. Besides this unique approach of kids who experienced the consequences talking to kids, I also proposed creating a tool that tested a teenager's ability to understand accountability. Dr. Howard and Mrs. Mitchell weren't sure I could perform any of this, but they were willing to lend me five months of their time, experience, and energy.

You are now able to gain possession of our efforts. We created a tool with a focus on abstinence but one which included information about pregnancy.

There are a number of school districts that decided that the information and the vehicle had more merit than their existing programs. It is worth noting that these school districts, including the State of Georgia had a previous relationship with Dr. Howard and her involvement was incentive for reviewing the product. However, once they were beyond her involvement, the tool stood on its own. Subsequently, they all raved about it and purchased it and are utilizing it.

The outcome is that you and your child will meet various adolescents who will share their experiences. Your child can evaluate these strangers and open up to you without feeling they are revealing themselves. They will reveal what they think about these other kids and the decisions they made. Where can that lead? We have made it easy for your kids to open up about their feelings, fears, knowledge, and attitudes and have a conversation with you. All you need to do is take the time.

We also developed some straight forward yet uncomplicated testing that will give a parent immediate feedback. You can immediately learn how much your child knows about sexual activity and how they feel about sexual activity. And you can teach them about people and

attitudes to be aware of. One aspect which has made this tool successful is the use of sound. During various segments when a good choice is made a positive sound is heard. When a questionable choice is made a less appealing sound is heard. You'll be amazed how much more attention your child will pay in order to not have that less appealing sound heard.

The kids in these interactive scenarios are actors, but they are portraying real people and real stories that lead to real emotional and psychological complications. I did not want my child to make those mistakes and I do not want yours to either.

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