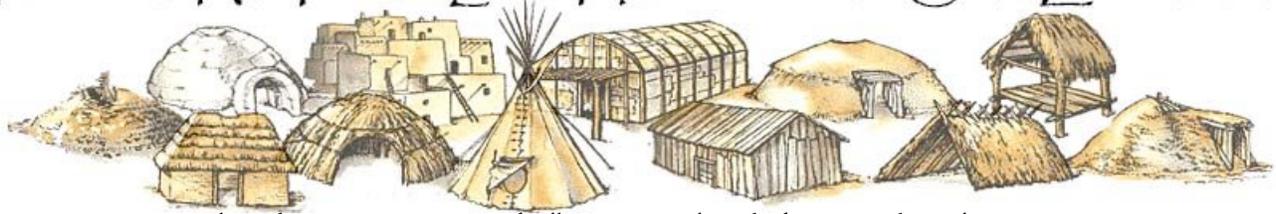


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## Strains and Gains

Guiding children through adolescence is an incredible challenge. Despite the wisdom gleaned from their own life experiences, parents often feel unprepared for issues currently facing teens. Lessons from our own adolescence may not hold true for today's youth.

It's also true that during their children's teen years, parents are given an amazing gift: the opportunity to guide and support a young person in becoming capable and independent. "You call raising adolescents a 'gift'?" laughed one parent. "It's the biggest struggle of my life! Rebellion! Turmoil! The complete absence of rational discussion. Hah! Some gift!"

**It may be tempting to equate adolescence with horror... but to the extent parents focus on the difficulties and pain, they miss the joys.**

For young people, two major tasks are at hand:

1. establishing independence - asserting themselves as separate and distinct from parents.
2. defining/clarifying a personal value system.

Simultaneously, parents face their own tasks:

1. letting go - allowing children the freedom to develop their separate identities.
2. establishing an atmosphere of safety and acceptance - in which attitudes and values can be explored, tested, challenged.

Heavy stuff... thus the "horror, pain and difficulty." Yet, when you understand the parent/child roles during adolescence, you can more effectively offer guidance and support.

For parents, it's unsettling to realize, "I don't have the ultimate power to create how my child's life will be." Long before their teen years, we recognize that in the long run, kids make their own decisions. Parent influence carries some weight, but wanes over time. Which is ok. After all, we're raising children to be responsible adults, capable (we hope) of making healthy choices in their lives.

Teens may select paths and adopt values that are different from ours, or not what we'd prefer. That's hard for parents to accept, particularly when the issues are *so very big*: relationships, sex, drugs, etc. Amidst all of this, parents are expected to let go, yet still provide guidance. This requires that they:

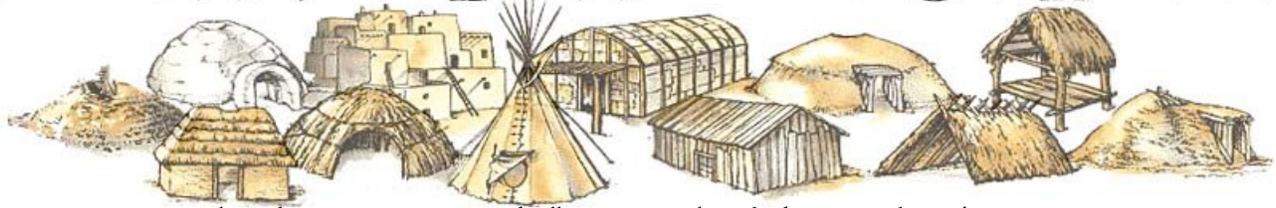
- offer opportunities for their children to make their own mistakes... then assist them in learning the lessons;
- express the family values and beliefs... then accept that the children may not fully embrace them;
- listen to ideas expressed by their children... then recognize the need to offer input - not dictates - based on personal beliefs.

Sounds good... but how to apply it? Especially with tough issues like sex? How can parents help kids make wise choices about their sexual behavior in a world that is sexually explicit and permissive?

You can only do your best... and there are no guarantees. Still, you can build the odds in your child's favor. Speak truthfully and sincerely with your child about sex. Offer the facts s/he needs to be informed and safe - along with your personal values - without suggesting they are one and the same.

Your 8th grader deserves to hear information about sexual development, feelings and behaviors; intercourse, sexual protection and pregnancy; sexual orientation; sexually transmitted infections and HIV... and more, including your beliefs around these issues. Many young teens are experimenting with sexual behaviors. And it simply isn't enough for parents to say, "Don't!"

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## But I'd Rather Talk to ...

As young people physically and sexually develop during adolescence, they're inclined to want to discuss related concerns with the same-gender parent or adult. (Assuming they're OK talking about the issue to begin with!)

"I've always had such a close relationship with my son, Tim," one mother recalls. I prided myself in talking openly with him about sexuality since he was very young. Tim's dad rarely involved himself in those discussions."

"So, I was surprised - and I admit, hurt - when Tim began confiding more in his father. Now he prefers to talk to his dad about sexual issues. I wonder if I've said or done something wrong."



Sounds like Tim is a typical young man, gravitating toward dad, especially when the subject turns to sexuality. That doesn't mean, mom, that your input is no longer important. Continue to let Tim know you're there for him. And, respect that at this stage of his life, Tim feels more comfortable discussing "guy stuff" with a guy. This is a nice opportunity for Tim to develop the sharing and trust with his dad that he's long enjoyed with you.

So what about single parents or families with gay or lesbian parents? Parents working to be both mom and dad to their teenagers confess they struggle with sexuality issues. They might consider calling upon grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. to fill their child's need for same-gender role models.

As parents address these special adolescent needs, they create opportunities to keep communication open, share information and family values, and assist children in feeling confident and comfortable with their changing sexual selves.

## Confusing Connections?

"I understand this business of same-gender role models and confidants during adolescence. What I don't understand is this intense attachment Rick has to his teacher, Mr. Brown. It's as though Rick has a crush on the guy! Is this... normal?"

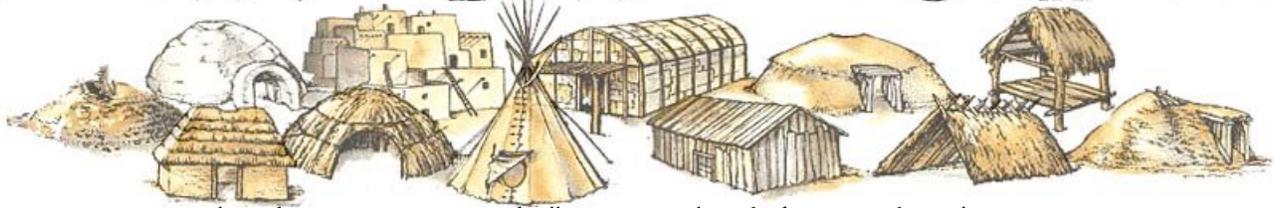
It's not necessarily an indication that Rick is gay, if that's what you mean. And crush is a good description of what may be going on. It's common for adolescents to develop a strong connection to a same-gender person of importance in their lives: a teacher, coach, perhaps even a classmate. This person might be someone they greatly admire, or someone they want to be like. Such friendship may offer them a deep sense of being cared about. The special bond they experience with this person often allows them to feel safe to seek advice or share their feelings and concerns. They may try to spend as much time as possible with this person, and may even feel jealous or upset if the relationship changes.

Such feelings can be terribly confusing to a young person - and to parents. If you're concerned about the relationship or believe your child may have concerns, talk with him or her about it. Have an open discussion about what defines a healthy friendship. Talk about the importance of honesty and respect in a relationship - no hidden motives or manipulation. Friends care about each other with no strings attached. If that's not the case, maybe it's time to reconsider the relationship.

Adolescents have many hidden anxieties about sexual orientation. "How can you tell if a person's gay?" "If a person masturbates, does that mean s/he's gay?" "Lisa and Ann are always together. They must be more than just 'friends,' don't you think?"

*Lots of questions, confusion... whether they're verbalized or not. Initiate the conversation, and help your child sort it out.*

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## Knowledge Is Power

Talking with your teenager about the pleasures, responsibilities and risks of sex does not imply that you sanction teens having sex. When parents are forthright and honest in discussing a range of sexual topics, they help their children develop respect for intimate relationships.

As part of this, of course, parents share personal and cultural values, religious beliefs, moral viewpoints, etc. Children want, need, and deserve that.

While no one suggests that these discussions be a "how to" manual, sexual specifics are important to the health and well-being of teenagers. Without such information, they are less able to make positive, appropriate choices around sexuality. Facts about birth control and sexual protection, risk of pregnancy, how HIV and other STD's

can be contracted *and* prevented: how does a parent approach such sensitive topics without worrying about giving a double message ("Don't do it... but if you do, use a condom.")?

You *can* communicate a loving, practical message. A parent might say something like: "Your father and I believe that teenagers are not ready for the emotions, responsibilities and risks that go along with sexual intercourse. We believe in waiting until... (you fill in the blank: marriage, a particular age, a committed, mature relationship... whatever you're comfortable with). If young people do have sex, they need to protect themselves from unintended pregnancy by using effective birth control and reduce the risk of infection by using condoms."

***"Our hope is that you confide in us if you're ever wrestling with decisions about sex. We'll do all we can to listen and to offer you information and guidance to consider in making your choice. Our highest priority is your well-being, so we want you to be informed."***

***"I've told you how I feel. I'm interested in hearing your thoughts about this."***

Remember the importance of listening to your children's opinions... even though at times, their views may be quite different from yours (and thus, hard to hear). Make it safe for your teenager to express personal thoughts without fear of judgment or repercussions. If s/he is met with anger or intimidation, s/he won't be back a second time. And you will miss the chance to explore and evaluate a variety of ideas with your child.

Within such discussions, many worthwhile points can be made... about love, intimacy, reasons why people have sex (both good and not-so-good), peer pressure, exploitation, delaying sex... a wealth of important stuff! A genuine give-and-take of ideas can allow your child to sort out the issues and draw some conclusions - hopefully before s/he is confronted with making the choices.

## Cultural Wisdom for a Difficult Time

Our Native culture celebrates a universal respect for life and nature. Inherent in this is an appreciation for the cycles of life. Adolescence is special part of that cycle and it will be over before you know it. Hopefully you have been able to raise your child with knowledge of his/her culture and an understanding of the rite of passage s/he is going through.

***Youth with a strong sense of cultural identity are much more likely to make healthy decisions about sexual activity.***

Customs and traditions vary greatly between tribes. Your Tribal Resource Center is a wonderful place to begin searching for ways to bring ceremony and cultural wisdom to your discussions with your teenager about growing up, relationships, and sex. Often tribal elders are willing to help you discuss these issues with your teenagers in a way that builds trust and honors tradition.



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## Things American Indian Eighth Graders Wish Their Parents and Caregivers Knew:

In talking circles, Native teenagers shared their ideas, opinions and suggestions for parents trying to talk to kids about sexual issues. Some of their suggestions are listed below.

“My mom tells my aunt everything I tell her, so I don't talk to her about personal stuff anymore.”

- **Keep talks with your teenager confidential** – kids said:
  - Don't go gossiping or sharing secrets
  - Don't tell other people what the kids tell you
  - Be trustworthy

Though some things may seem harmless or unimportant, it might be important to your child. In small communities like ours, and especially on reservations, things travel fast by word of mouth. Your child's trust in you is on the line. Try your best to be worthy of their trust.

“I can't trust my parents not to run their mouths if I tell them anything.”

- **How to have talks about sexual issues** – kids suggested:
  - Start slow and stay simple.
  - Don't be afraid to talk- just come out and say it.
  - Don't assume kids are clueless or treat them like they are “dumb.” They know a lot more than you think they do.
  - Be relaxed and just go for it.
  - No matter what they say, DON'T get angry. It makes them not talk to you about it again.
  - Make yourself available when THEY want to talk.
  - Don't go on and on. Once they get it, stop. To know if they get it, ask, “Do you understand?”
  - Don't force kids to talk. Let them know your door is open when they are ready.
- **When to have talks** – here are some of their ideas:
  - Pick a comfortable, casual, *private* setting for talks about growing up issues.
  - Use times when topics come up on TV to initiate discussions... not dinner time.
  - Set aside some special time to spend together, go on a walk with child, go driving, go out together
- **Including culture in your talks** – what would be helpful to them:
  - Some tribes use humor and joking to deal with uncomfortable issues. Be careful about when you use this humor because it might be a sensitive issue for your teen. One young woman said her parents don't take her questions seriously and make jokes about it. If you want your child to come to you with questions, use good judgment about when to use humor and when to be serious with your conversation.
  - Several teens said that they would like to know native words and phrases in their language for body parts, behaviors, and important attitudes.

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## Facts About HIV/AIDS

- **More than 45% of high school females and 48% of high school males have had sexual intercourse.**
- **Each year, 1 in 4 sexually active teens gets a sexually transmitted disease.**

The same activity that puts young people at risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) also puts them at risk of HIV infection.

You never imagined talking so explicitly with your children about sex. Yet currently, no vaccine or medication can prevent or cure AIDS. You're painfully aware that some teens have sex at young ages, and their experimentation with sex and drugs puts them at risk of HIV. You know the best protection you can offer is education. Surely you want to provide that.

It's time for significant detail about HIV transmission and prevention... to clear up misconceptions or fears your children may have.... and to keep them safe.

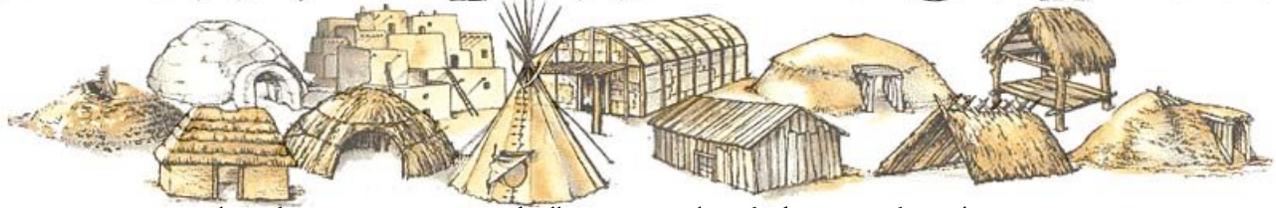
Preview the HIV curriculum being used at school to supplement and support the program at home. While many students receive classroom instruction on this and related sexual issues, family input is essential as well. This provides reinforcement of information and opportunity to share family values and parental guidance.

### 8th graders should understand the following:

- AIDS is caused by HIV (human immunodeficiency virus). Once in the bloodstream, HIV weakens the immune system so the body cannot effectively fight off disease.
- The 4 body fluids known to transmit HIV are blood, semen, vaginal fluid and breast milk. Risk behaviors are activities that involve exposure to these fluids, for example: unprotected intercourse (vaginal, anal or oral) with an infected person; sharing needles (used for injection drugs, steroids, etc.) with an infected person. (Do not share razors, body piercing needles or tattooing instruments.)
- HIV can be passed from mother to baby during pregnancy, birth or breast feeding.
- People have contracted HIV from blood transfusions. Since 1985, donated blood and blood products have been screened for the virus, so the risk of receiving infected blood is miniscule.
- HIV does not discriminate. It affects people of all ages, races, religions. It is not confined to gay men or injection drug users. Anyone engaging in risky behaviors can be exposed to the virus.
- HIV is not transmitted by casual contact like hugging, kissing, sharing food with an infected person. Being sneezed or coughed on by an HIV+ person does not spread the infection... but could spread colds or flu!
- AIDS cannot be cured at this time. HIV infection *can* be prevented. The only 100% prevention is abstaining from sharing needles and risky sexual behaviors.
- There are medications that can slow down the progression of HIV, but they are not effective for everyone, and they aren't a cure. The person is still infected with HIV, and can infect others.
- If a person does have oral, anal or vaginal sex, s/he should know that: the more sexual partners, the greater the risk of exposure; correct and consistent use of latex condoms and barriers such as dental dams offers protection against the spread of HIV and other STIs. (Share information on correct condom use. This is not a 100% guarantee, but is highly effective. Birth control pills and other contraceptives reduce the risk of pregnancy, but only abstinence and latex condoms protect against HIV and other STDs.)

Although family discussions about HIV / AIDS / STDs can be uncomfortable and difficult, they can also be empowering... that's the good news.

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## Media Mania: Sex Sells

Parents need to recognize that while they strongly influence their children's lives, they're not the *only* ones. In considering decisions about sexuality, young people hear many voices: parents, friends, media, health professionals, spiritual and religious leaders - each contributing influence and pressure that affect their choices.

You can't guarantee that your sons and daughters won't have sexual intercourse during their teen years. You can, however, assist them with information, guidance, and strategies for dealing with pressures that encourage sex among youth. While the pressures are many and powerful, some of the most dramatic stem from the media. Consider the following national survey results:

- The average viewer is exposed yearly to 20,000+ sexually explicit messages on TV.
- Teens spend approx. 24 hours per week watching TV; 16 hours per week listening to the radio.
- By age 18, the average student has spent 15,000+ hours watching TV, but only 11,000 hours in school.

Explicit media messages about sexual behavior permeate our lives - every day. Sex is used to sell everything from swimwear to toothpaste. TV sitcoms sizzle with passionate interplay and sexual innuendoes. Song lyrics, music videos, web sites and billboards graphically depict sexy images.

## Media Messages: Insecurities, Stereotypes, and Active Viewing

The media affect people in many ways. Those "perfect" faces and figures may leave us feeling inadequate about our own bodies. For adolescents in a stage of dramatic (usually awkward) development, the impact can be devastating. By suggesting that the ultimate love life and a desirable body are of utmost importance, the media promote unrealistic expectations. This can set teens up for disappointment and dissatisfaction with themselves and their relationships.

Sometimes the message is more subtle. Consider sex role stereotyping. In ads, for example, who usually touts laundry soap, diet foods, or quick and easy dinner menus? Women. Often associated with domestic chores and "softer" job responsibilities... a great looker, but not too bright... the traditional female stereotype is perpetuated by the media.

Male roles tend to be equally stifling. True, they're cast as more assertive, independent, powerful, successful, intelligent... all of which are viewed favorably. Yet they also model lack of sensitivity, a "one-track mind" approach to relationships, and the "macho" image which discourages healthy social/emotional development in males.

The sadness of it all is that we've become so accustomed to the limiting stereotypes in the media, that we're almost oblivious to them!

We can challenge this! We can empower our children by alerting them to the pervasiveness and implications of sexual messages. **Confront these messages whenever they appear. Assert your feelings about them, and encourage your child to do the same.**

*As a family*, examine how distortions of the media influence attitudes and decisions about many sexual issues: body image, relationships, male/female roles and expectations, readiness for sex, sexual responsibility, etc.

**By critically viewing and discussing media messages, we help young people put media influence into perspective.**

As a Native people we have an obligation to our youth to help them realize their dreams. Though some Native cultures have certain reserved roles for men and women, most Native societies historically encouraged equality between men and women. It is important to help our young people learn to respect both genders and honor the way that their strengths complement each other.