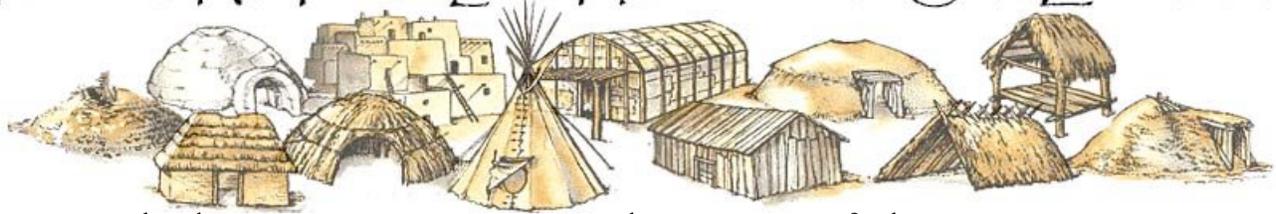


There's No Place Like Home... for Sex Education



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Things Your 9th Grader Really Wants to Know...

How can you tell you're in love? What's it like to have sex? Do you just know what to do? How old should you be? How do you know if it's the right person?

A typical group of 9th graders asked these questions at a recent parent/teen workshop designed to help families talk about sex. When asked to write down (anonymously) what they really wished they could discuss with parents, many teens listed these items. Surprised? The parents were – at first. But on further reflection, parents found they weren't really surprised by the questions. Rather, they were caught off guard – and unprepared to answer.

Teens wonder about love, sex, relationships. They want details: how, why and when. They have lists of curiosities and concerns, and are rarely encouraged to voice them. Often they don't feel safe enough to speak with parents about such intimate matters.

Assume that given the chance, your 9th grader would ask you about all of this. Wouldn't you like to share your ideas? After all, peers and the media certainly spread their messages about sex.

If you added your message, what would it be?

These questions may cause you discomfort. You're being asked to look deeply into your own values. You may have difficulty putting your feelings into words at first... that's ok. The words may not come easily, but that's no reason to avoid the subject. Your children do care what you think, feel and value. They want to hear from you.

So how do you begin - especially if you and your teen rarely (or never) talk with each other about sexuality? First, realize this needn't be THE BIG TALK. **Young people aren't just interested in sex. They want to know about the whole business of living: connecting and relating to others and understanding themselves. Sharing your innermost feelings about your own life, your own growing up years, can give kids insight... and comfort. It opens doors for discussion of lots of things... including sex.**

To start a conversation, consider the following interview used in the parent/teen workshop. This can be a special sharing time for you and your child.

Begin by agreeing on ground rules, for example:

1. All that is shared is confidential;
2. You can speak honestly, without fear of consequences;
3. You can pass if you choose; etc.

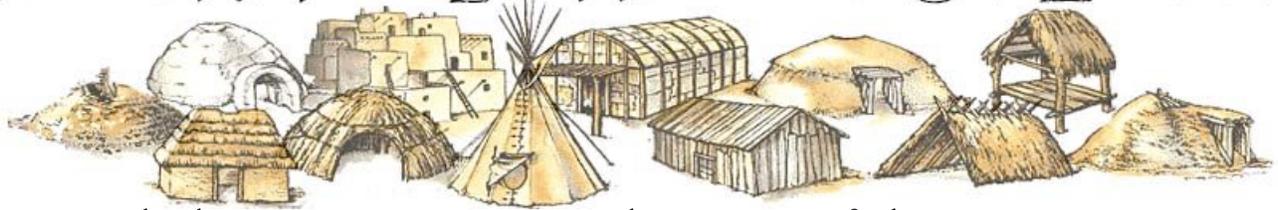
FOR TEENS TO ASK PARENTS:

- *What did you enjoy most about being a teenager? What was most difficult?*
- *What did you learn growing up that now helps you as an adult?*
- *What's the best part about being a parent? The most difficult?*
- *Tell me about the day I was born.*
- *How did you feel about other and same-gendered friends when you were my age? Did you have a boyfriend/girlfriend? When were you allowed to date?*
- *What was expected of you because of your gender? How do you feel about those expectations now?*
- *How have you felt about physical changes in your body?*
- *What would you change about your body... if you could?*

FOR PARENTS TO ASK TEENS:

- *What do you enjoy most about being your age? What's most difficult?*
- *What's most important in your life now?*
- *What do you see as pros & cons of being male/female?*
- *What are some things you look for in a friend?*
- *What do you wish we could talk about more openly together?*
- *How have you felt about the physical changes in your body?*
- *What would you change about your body... if you could?*

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Walls ... and Bridges

Imagine having a frank and open discussion with your 9th grader about these issues. What fears, concerns or emotions get in the way for you?

Communicating with youth about sex.... As parents and adult family, we *should* be doing it ... most of us *want* to be doing it ... but often *don't*. Because of the stuff that gets in the way.

Stuff like:

FEAR "What if my son rejects the values I so want him to live by?"

CONFUSION "If I discuss birth control or 'safer sex' practices with my daughter, won't she think I approve of her having sex?"

EMBARRASSMENT "I feel awkward even using the words 'penis' and 'vagina'... how in the world can I possibly talk about anal intercourse as a behavior that can increase the risk of HIV infection?"

LACK OF INFORMATION "Menstrual cycle... wet dreams... I know the basics, but I haven't a clue about all the details."

Even parents who were fairly open about sexual discussions when their children were little will often find themselves stuck, unnerved, or just plain at a loss once the adolescent years hit. Yes, the issues *are* far more complex... AND, it's *more* than that. The parent/child roles change significantly. With small children, parents essentially set the rules, promote the values, and select the paths for learning and growth. With adolescents, parents discuss (perhaps negotiate) rules and offer a rationale for their importance. Values continue to be emphasized and promoted... but at times with a panicked assertiveness (which can trigger anger, frustration... and an end to the conversation).

A very real fear is that our children may reject some core beliefs and attitudes we want them to embrace.

Ultimately, teens challenge, test, and accept, reject or modify their parents' values. Studies show that adolescents endorse many of the family's basic values and beliefs. It is also true is that they accept (at least temporarily) the values endorsed by their peers.

You can create safety *within the family* for your children to discuss or question differing values.

Encourage them to think out loud, to examine beliefs and the possible impact of going with (or against) those beliefs. Frank discussions in which parents and children listen to and speak with (not at) one another enhance young people's ability to make thoughtful choices.

As you speak with your child about issues such as sexual relationships, birth control, sexual protection, teen pregnancy, etc., you have the responsibility to present family and cultural values and a responsibility to provide factual information. Teenagers can accept a parent message that endorses abstinence as well as the importance of sexual protection for those choosing to have a sexual relationship. *These are not mutually exclusive values.* They're not contradictions. This is a loving message that helps teens in developing positive, respectful attitudes and behaviors around sexuality. Unlike "Just say *no*," it's a message that gets through to kids; that supports growth, maturity and thoughtful decision-making.

Remember: the stuff that gets in the way of open parent/teen communication about sex is the same stuff that sabotages the growth of positive and responsible sexual beliefs and behaviors. It is the very stuff that results in kids at risk. And... it is also the stuff we can confront, challenge, and change!



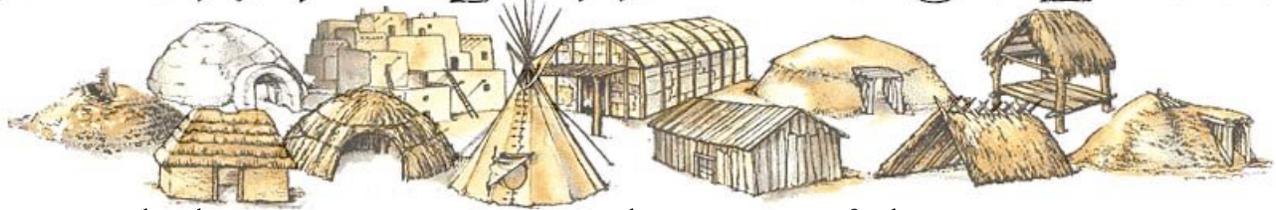
Premature sex
HIV/AIDS
Sexually transmitted infections
Confusion, Hurt
Teenage pregnancy



Safer sex
Love & Commitment
Relationships
Preparedness
Awareness
Protection

Communication changes the Balance

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Peer Power, Pressures, Set-ups: How You Can Prepare Your Teen

In a nationwide poll, teens named social pressure as a major reason young people don't wait until they're older to have sexual intercourse. Males and females said they personally felt pressured by peers to go farther with sexual activity than they wanted. Peer influence is especially powerful during the teen years. Eager for approval, acceptance and popularity, young people often see no other alternative than going along with the crowd.

Parents feel anxious about this for many reasons, including the recognition that their own influence is declining. It's tempting to simply lay down the law: "No argument... just do as I tell you." This may bring short-term compliance from a teen (along with anger and resentment). But the long-term goal gets lost: teaching adolescents to make thoughtful decisions; to deal with challenges and peer pressure when mom and dad are not there.

Parents can help teens build knowledge, skills, and a vocabulary to confront peer pressure around sexual decision-making. This requires an appreciation of how that pressure might work. For example:

Some young people feel pressured by boy/girlfriends:
"If you loved me, you would." Or, "What's the big deal? Everybody else is doing it."

Encourage your teen to find creative replies to such lines: "If you really cared about me, you wouldn't push me into something I'm not ready for." "I know everyone's not having sex. And besides, I make my own choices." It helps to practice words in response to verbal pressures.

Given an opportunity, many boys express frustration with pressure they feel from male peers. "You didn't do anything? What's wrong with you? Come on, be a man." "Look, even if she says 'no,' she probably just wants to be talked into it."

The typical locker room is filled with tales of sexual exploits: little truth, and lots of fabrication. For a sexually inexperienced male, the anxiety mounts. Having a quick response can take the edge off. Something like... "What my girlfriend and I do together is no one's business. I don't need to prove anything to you or anyone else."

Let your teens know you **understand how intense sexual feelings can be during adolescence**. Remind them that these perfectly normal feelings can be confusing. It may be difficult to know what to do, how to act.

Help your children sort out the possible effects of sexual decisions before they face the choices. Ask them to weigh any consequences of saying "no" to sexual activity, as well as saying "yes." Describe situations and ask them to consider the outcomes.

Talk about "set-ups" - in which sexual activity is more likely to occur. For example: "What if Diane decides to spend the day at her boyfriend's when no one else is

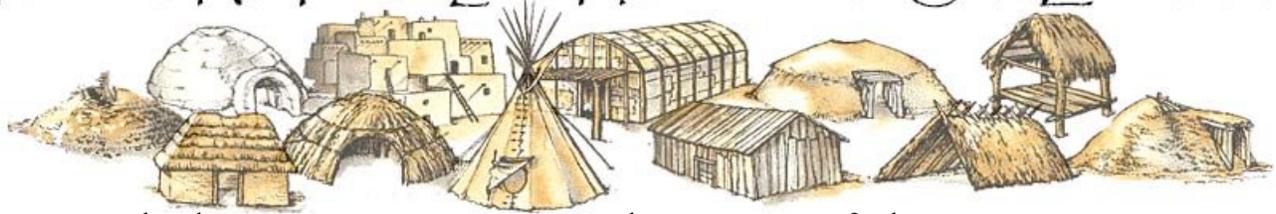


home?" "What if Kurt and his girlfriend go to a party where they drink alcohol (or do drugs)? How might that affect their decisions about sex?"

Help your teenager decide on acceptable, responsible ways of expressing love, affection, and sexuality. If you believe that sex is *not* OK for teens, by all means, say so... then discuss what sexual expression is OK.

Young people need support in preparing for sexual pressures they're likely to face. Don't just assume they know enough to stay out of those situations. Help them develop the skills to *get out of those situations* - just in case they land in one.

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The Rest of the Story: Sex is About More than “Baby Making”... and Your Teen Knows It

Amidst all the teen pregnancy statistics and dangers of sexually transmitted diseases, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that responsible sexuality is a richly exciting and special part of life. **Some parents tend to focus solely on the horrors that result from “sex too soon,” and neglect to share the rest of the story.**

It's important - and only fair - that parents present intercourse as more than just “the baby-making process.” **Kids deserve to understand that people have sex for many reasons, including intimacy and pleasure.** (Teenagers strongly suspect this anyway, so why not talk about it?!)

Of course you will talk with your 9th grader about sexual expression within the context of your own beliefs and values. Whether you wish to emphasize marriage, or a mature, committed relationship, or whatever... please reinforce that sex, at the right time, can be a delightful expression of love, sharing, and connection.

Yes, sexual relationships can also lead to serious problems, especially for the young, the uninformed, the unprepared. If we present only that angle, however we're giving incomplete, distorted, sex-negative messages. Our people were taught these sex-negative messages during the boarding school era when shaming and abuse left scars on our people that will take many generations

to heal. Keep our history in mind when you talk to your teen and begin to heal the circle for the next generation.

It is important to teach young people that sex means different things to different individuals. Misunderstanding a partner's views or expectations of what sex is all about can result in confusion, unhappiness... crises. Such is the pattern we frequently see with teenage sexual activity - when sex typically happens with little or no communication beforehand. The experience is often disappointing at the very least... and many times filled with anxiety, guilt, embarrassment, regret.

Because parents want to warn against all of this, they often focus on the crises that can follow teen sex. They may do so with the best of intentions: to spare children pain and unhappiness; to point out possible dangers; perhaps to promote certain values and beliefs.

In our culture, where so much historical trauma still haunts each Native person's self-image, it is important for American Indian youth to develop a complete, healthy, and balanced view of the natural sexual side of themselves. Sexual intimacy is believed to be a special gift from the Great Spirit by many Native cultures. We owe it to our youth and future generations to pass on a culture of honor and respect for one another.

Honest, loving family discussion about sexual experience does more to prevent the difficulties of “sex too soon” than any scare tactics or half truths - no matter how well intentioned.



Raising “good lovers” – its about honor and respect

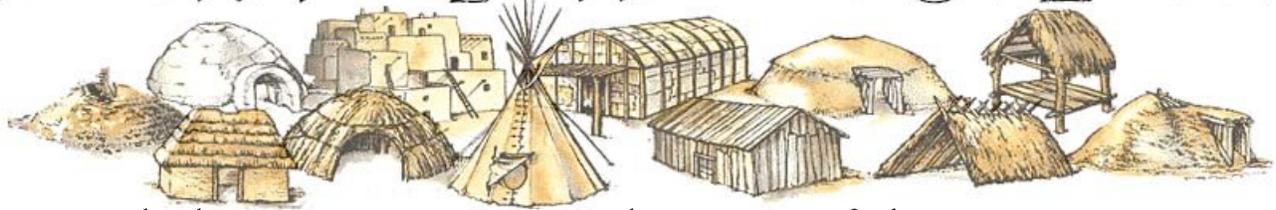
When we talk to our youth about sexual feelings and relationships, we want to pass on our cultural beliefs and values. This means teaching our young people about the importance of honor, respect, and responsibility. One father explained:

“I want to raise my child to be a good lover. Not a performer, but a good lover. To me that embodies love, respect, honor, maturity, responsibility, honesty, commitment, growth, intimacy, joy and pleasure.”

Think about what this means to you and how you can pass on these values to your teen. What does it mean to respect your partner? To respect yourself? To honor your values?

Imagine if all families raised their children to be such “good lovers.” The impact on their lives could be tremendous. And society may well see a reduction in the difficulties of teen sexual behavior. Restoring these Native values to our youth will begin to heal the scars left by the past.

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Time to Reinforce an Understanding of Bodies and Sexual Development

Many of the sexual topics discussed with your child when s/he was younger take on more urgency and evoke new or immediate interest during adolescence. You may think you have explained to death such issues as the menstrual cycle, sexual relationships, pregnancy, childbirth, etc. Surely your teen has a clear understanding of all this by now! Not necessarily. At any rate, it doesn't hurt to review, especially now that the issues are more pertinent.

This is a good time to remind both boys and girls about the development and workings of each other's bodies. Let's not isolate by discussing the menstrual cycle only with daughters, or wet dreams only with sons.

So parents, remind your children that:

- Depending on a woman's cycle, pregnancy may still be possible, even if intercourse happens during (or just before, or just after) your period. Assume there is no "safe time" for teens to have unprotected sex.
- You can get pregnant if you only have sex once... or once in a while.
- Birth control pills offer protection against pregnancy, but not against sexually transmitted diseases or HIV.

Misconceptions about sexual issues are even held by many adults. Don't be too surprised if you're one of them. And you needn't be concerned if you don't have all the answers or if you're unsure about the details. You don't have to be a "sexpert" to communicate with your children. There are many resources to help you.

It's not within the scope of this newsletter series to provide thorough coverage of sex education issues. Rather, "**There's No Place Like Home...**" is designed to help parents become more aware of the kinds of information young people need; it's intended to encourage family communication about sex, and to suggest ways in which that communication might be fostered.

Question: "I don't know if my son/daughter is having sex. I'm hoping s/he's not. Nevertheless, I want the message about safer sex to be clear. How can I do that?"

Answer: Share your values *and* share the facts. Consider asking your doctor or health care provider to talk with your teen during a routine check up (when you aren't in the room). Their discussion will be confidential, and your teen may respect the advice of a medical professional and take the safer sex message seriously. Remember too that having condoms and contraceptives on hand does not promote sex. It *does* promote the importance being prepared.

Your daughters and sons will be interacting with the other gender throughout life. It's important that they understand and appreciate how each other's bodies function. It's appropriate to ask help from Aunts, Grandmothers, and female elders to explain to a young woman how her body – and how a young man's body – works. Similarly, Uncles, Grandfathers, and male elders can assist in these discussions with young men.

This is also an ideal time to re-emphasize cause and effect with regard to sex and possible pregnancy. Talk frankly about oral, anal and vaginal sex and the need for protection with each of these activities. Many young people think that "having sex" means vaginal sex only!

Helpful resources are listed in the Appendix of this manual. Your local Indian Health Service or Tribal Resource Center is a great place to start for finding information about improving family communication and for culturally relevant materials about sexual issues. Also we encourage you to discuss your experiences communicating about sexual issues with tribal elders and spiritual leaders. The wisdom of these leaders can give you helpful insights for communicating and getting through to your teen.

Your family doctor or health care provider may also be a good source of correct information.