

# What Have We Learned from Parents and Teens?

By Jennifer Grossman, Ph.D., and Amanda Richer, M.A.

We interviewed 23 pairs of teens and parents from an urban Northeast city about conversations they have regarding dating, sex, and relationships. We talked with the pairs 2 times -- in 7th grade and 10th grade.

One challenge to communication:

Parents are **more comfortable** talking with teens about sex in high school than in middle school. But teens are **less comfortable** talking to parents about sex in high school than in middle school.

## What Parents Said

### What do parents talk about with their teens?

- 95% talk about sexual risk and protection.
- 91% talk about dating and relationships .
- 61% talk about concrete reasons (e.g. finish school, get married) to delay sex.
- 48% talk about emotional reasons (e.g. maturity, being in a committed relationship) to delay sex.

### Why do parents talk with teens about sex?

- To protect teens from future risk.
- To give teens accurate information.
- To answer teens' questions about sex.

About 70% of parents say they are comfortable talking with their teens about sex even though sometimes they don't know what to say.

## What Teens Said

- All teens talk to at least 1 parent about sex and relationships.
- 86% of teens talk with parents and extended family (e.g. older siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles).
- Teens get more messages from parents than from extended family about delaying sex and avoiding teen pregnancy.
- Parents and extended family talk with teens about using protection.

### Why do teens talk to extended family?

- Similar life experiences.
- Comfort with these conversations.

### Why do teens avoid talking to parents?

- Teens feel awkward.
- Teens worry about being judged.

## How to talk to YOUR teens (and young adults) about sex:

1. Figure out what's important to you and share it with your teens.
2. Listen to what your teens have to say (or what they may have trouble saying).
3. Keep the door open – sometimes the first conversation is just an icebreaker.
4. Give your teens medically accurate information about sex.
5. Start conversations with your teens before they have sex.
6. Don't forget about your boys! Many parents talk with their daughters more often than their sons. Talk with sons early and often to support their sexual health, too.
7. Don't get discouraged! Teens may roll their eyes or walk away from the conversation but it doesn't mean they are not listening.

This work was supported by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [R03HD073381-01].