

Poll shows parents need to be more direct and specific with teens about sexuality and relationships

October 15 2014, by Robert Polner

October marks Let's Talk Month, aimed at getting families talking about sexuality and relationships, and this year the Center for Latino Adolescent and Family Health (CLAFH) at New York University's Silver School of Social Work, and Planned Parenthood Federation of America are emphasizing how important it is for parents to go beyond "the talk" and have ongoing conversations throughout their children's lives.

Planned Parenthood and CLAFH polled parents and their children aged 9-21 to investigate how well families communicate about sexuality and relationships. The poll was conducted in July 2014 by GfK Custom Research, LLC on behalf of Planned Parenthood and CLAFH.

The results of the 2014 Let's Talk Month survey show that while both parents and children report that they are talking about sexuality and relationships and do not report many barriers to conversations, many parents aren't talking very much or very specifically. For example:

- By age 21, one in five parents have never talked with their teen about strategies for saying no to [sex](#), birth control methods, or where to get accurate sexual health information. Over 30 percent of parents have never talked with their teens about where to get [reproductive health](#) care services. These are crucial topics for parents to discuss with their teens.

- The majority of parents (61 percent) report wanting young people to wait to have sex until they are ready to handle the responsibilities that come from having a sexual relationship—far more than support waiting until marriage (45 percent). However, only 52 percent of parents report ever talking specifically about these values with their children. Parents need to more clearly communicate their values to their children.
- The vast majority of parents know when their teens are having sexual intercourse, but not when they are having [oral sex](#). Among teens and young adults 15-21 who reported having
- vaginal sex, 91 percent of their parents knew. However, among teens having oral sex, only 40 percent of their parents knew. Asking direct questions about teens' relationships and sexual behavior can help.

"The survey shows that parents are talking, but they're not talking about some of the topics that are most critical to protecting their children's health. As teens get older, they need help with specific strategies for negotiating relationships and where to get information and services. It's important for parents to both ask clear, direct questions about their children's relationships and activities, so they know what is happening in their children's lives and can have the opportunity to share their own values," said Vincent Guilamo-Ramos, PhD, co-director of CLAFH and a professor of social work at New York University. "Parents can make a real difference in their teens' decisions about sex—if they talk regularly about the things that influence decision making."

A growing body of scientific evidence shows that certain topics influence [young people](#)'s sexual decision making and behavior more than others. Parents can make a difference in their teens' sexual decision making by talking about whether or not their [teens](#) are ready for a sexual relationship and why, emotions that accompany having sex, what to expect from sexual relationships, and the advantages and disadvantages

of having sex. Families Talking Together, developed by CLAFH, is an evidence-based program for families focused on these important topics. The program and materials are available for free [here](#).

One way to make conversations about sex and relationships part of everyday life is to use pop culture that touches on sexuality, relationships, and reproductive health to open up conversations. Television can be a way to continually introduce these topics into family discussions. This year, Planned Parenthood Federation of America created "The Talk Show: Using Television to Talk to Your Children About Sex," a guide that provides sample conversation-starters and guidance for parents.

Planned Parenthood affiliates throughout the country are holding special workshops and events to help families communicate about sex and relationships. These include communication skills workshops for parents and family nights to help parents and their children talk together.

"Planned Parenthood is committed to helping parents to be the primary sex educators of their own children," said Leslie Kantor, Planned Parenthood Federation of America vice president for education. "For this year's Let's Talk Month, we wanted to find out more about the conversations parents and children are currently having about sexuality. What we found is that more parents need to be direct and specific when discussing topics of sexuality with their children, and they need to keep talking as their children get older."

Provided by New York University

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