

WHY YOU NEED TO TALK WITH YOUR TEEN ABOUT ALCOHOL AND SEXUAL RISKS

by Stephen J. Fallon, Ph.D.

Do you need to have “the talk” with your kids? Many parents feel awkward broaching the subject of human sexuality, and the risks of disease and early pregnancy. For a while it seemed that parents had lucked into a “free pass” from the conversation. In the United States, teen pregnancy rates had fallen 34% over the past 14 years. But in 2006, that promising trend reversed itself, with rates rising three percent nationwide.¹ Ironically, some experts are concerned that the nation’s focus on abstinence-only education in schools is actually contributing to this trend, by muting conversation about safer sex practices.²

Teen pregnancy is not the only risk facing teens. Researchers surveyed 209 teenage girls, asking if they perceived themselves at risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease. Though three-quarters of the girls surveyed were sexually active, 89% said they had little or no risk. When researchers checked back in with these same girls 18 months later, one-quarter had been infected with an STD.³

In its most recent survey (released March 2008), the Centers for Disease Control found that about half of 14 to 19 year old girls have had sex, and 40% of them have acquired chlamydia, human papillomavirus (HPV), trichomoniasis, or herpes.⁴ That works out to an infection rate of 26% of all 14 to 19 year old girls nationwide. Why don’t more parents know that their teens may be at risk? Dr. John M. Douglas Jr., director of CDC’s Division of STD Prevention, said that some doctors also believe “Sexually transmitted diseases don’t happen to the kinds of patients I see.”

Teenagers are just as vulnerable to the most dangerous STD of all: HIV. While few teens get tested, experts estimate that at least one quarter of our nation’s 40,000 to 55,000 new HIV infections each year strike youth under age 22.⁵ We don’t “see” this crisis because HIV typically takes a decade to progress to visible manifestations of AIDS.

¹ Hamilton BE, Martin JA, Ventura SJ. “Births: Preliminary data for 2006.” *National vital statistics reports*; vol 56 no 7. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2007.

² Stein R. “Teen Birth Rate Rises in U.S., Reversing a 14-Year Decline.” *Washington Post*, December 6, 2007.

³ Ethier1 K, et al. “Adolescent Women Underestimate Their Susceptibility to Sexually Transmitted Infections,” *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 2003; 79:408-411.

⁴ CDC. “Nationally Representative CDC Study Finds 1 in 4 Teenage Girls Has a Sexually Transmitted Disease.” *2008 National STD Prevention Conference*, Chicago, March 11, 2008.

⁵ Office of National AIDS Policy. *Youth and HIV/AIDS 2000: A New American Agenda*. Washington, DC: Office of National AIDS Policy; 2000.

© 2008 Stephen J. Fallon, Skills4, Inc.

Stephen Fallon is the President of Skills4, Inc., a healthcare and disease-prevention consulting firm serving clinics and community agencies nationwide. Visit his website at www.skills4.org

Most parents assume that it's those *other* teens (those bad ones!) who are having sex. And every teen wants to think that they are safe from risks because they choose the *good* boyfriend or girlfriend. You can make a difference not only by discussing sexual risks, but also by helping your teens develop a healthy perspective of cautious optimism. If a character in a movie behaves unexpectedly, talk with your teen about how humans sometimes do not see a situation the same way, and how some people can become misled into a bad future. You can validate your teens' excitement during a crush or first love while still grounding their expectations in reality.

In the United States, teenagers who drink alcohol are also more likely to engage in sexual risk behaviors. I say, "in the United States" because in some other countries where alcohol is more normalized, drinking is not associated with sexual risk.⁶ We Americans have an ambivalent relationship with alcohol, which can make discussions challenging. Some adults, and certainly teens, associate alcohol with freedom, rebellion, or "coolness." These Americanized beliefs seem to drive the link between alcohol and sexual risk behaviors here.

Nationwide, over a quarter of U.S. high school students admit to "binge drinking" (having more than five drinks in a row) in the past month.⁷ Teens drink more than a third of all wine coolers in the U.S., and high school juniors and seniors drink 1.1 billion cans of beer each year.⁸

Behind their cool shades and strategically-casual attire, your teens may actually feel very confused or insecure about their developing sexuality. Teens seem to use alcohol as a "permission slip" to experimentation. That is, they don't just engage in risky sex because alcohol clouded their judgment; they *choose* to drink so that they can have a built in excuse for their awkward experimentation.⁹

Just as with sex, most American parents convince themselves that *other* kids are doing

⁶ Crowe LC and George WH, "Alcohol and human sexuality: review and integration," *Psychological Bulletin*, 1989, 10(3):374-386; and Room R and Collins G, *Alcohol and Disinhibition: Nature and Meaning of the Link*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1983.

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, 2003." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 2004:53(No. SS-2), May 21.

⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Youth and Alcohol: A National Survey*, 1991.

⁹ Critchlow B, "Blaming the booze: the attribution of responsibility for drunken behavior." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 1983, 9(3):451-473; Lang AR, "The social psychology of drinking and human sexuality." *Journal of Drug Issues*, 1985, 15(2):273-289; and MacAndrew C and Edgerton RB, *Drunken Comportment: A Social Explanation*, Chicago: Aldine, 1969.

all of the drinking, not their star student. I recall vividly my middle school neighbor, who faithfully attended church with her family and who was always above average in her classes. Her parents would never have believed that their ninth-grader, Karen won her coolness by getting bottles of Irish Whiskey from her boyfriend (whose father owned a liquor store), and leaving straws poking out of the vents in her locker for others to imbibe during the school day!

Signs that your teen may be drinking can include sudden changes in behavior such as:

- hanging out with a new, often older, crowd
- cutting classes or sliding on grades
- avoiding family or friends
- staying out of school, sometimes several days at a time
- losing interest in activities or hobbies
- constant tiredness, confusion, depression, or blackouts
- getting into fights or arguing constantly with parents

Again, many of these behaviors just reflect teen angst. The signal is if any arise as sudden changes in your teen's normal history.

You can help build your teen's resilience so that she or he resists the temptation to "party" along with everyone else. Encourage your teen to engage in hobbies that connect him/her to the broader school community. A good way to broach the subjects is by keeping an eye out for an "ice breaker" about these subjects from TV, in a song, or in a movie, and use it to discuss the very real risks of drinking, and of sexual experimentation.

© 2008 Stephen J. Fallon, Skills4, Inc.

Stephen Fallon is the President of Skills4, Inc., a healthcare and disease-prevention consulting firm serving clinics and community agencies nationwide. Visit his website at www.skills4.org