



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

Part I - Uncomfortable conversations: What's the problem?

Twenty-four percent of teenage girls have a sexually transmitted infection according to research published in the November issue of *Pediatrics*. How is it that our children can be so ignorant about sexual health or fail to act on what they know?

A recent study also published in *Pediatrics* gives us some insight into that question. We talk too little and too late about sex. Forty percent of teens have sexual relations before we've had any meaningful discussion with them about sexuality, pregnancy, and health.

This is not a surprise to most parents. Talking about sex with our children feels uncomfortable, both for them and for us. We avoid topics that are embarrassing. We worry that perhaps we'll say the wrong thing, or give too little or too much information. We are uneasy that we may be asked personal questions about our own sexual behavior or history. Do we really want to discuss with our kids our first sexual partner or how often we have sex with our spouse?

Our avoidance of these topics leaves our kids ignorant and vulnerable. Some kids will search the Internet for information, and acquire all kinds of myths about their sexual development. Even when kids know what to do, they don't do what they know. Among sexually active teens, 53 percent of boys and two thirds of the girls reported that condoms are not always used in sexual intercourse.

We avoid discussing many other important topics with our children, such as death, divorce, suicide or sexual abuse. Our intentions are good. We want to protect them and not overwhelm them with adult issues. We are fearful of making a mistake and causing problems rather than eliminating anxiety.

We don't tell them about our health problems or issues with our spouse. We warn them about 'stranger danger,' but the greatest risk of sexual abuse comes not from an unfamiliar person but trusted

relatives and friends. How can you discuss those issues with your kids without scaring them about all relationships?

I'm amazed by how much kids know about family secrets, including their parents' marital problems and infidelities. I can certainly understand why these would not be dinner topics of conversations. However, kids know just enough about this stuff to leave them suspicious, angry and anxious.

For parents who have been able to engage their kids in discussions of sensitive issues, the impact has been incredibly beneficial on their relationship. When parents are open, direct and honest about tough issues, kids respond by allowing parents entrance into their own private worlds. This results in a kind of emotional intimacy that really connects parents and kids.

This sounds great, but how parents accomplish this? Part two of this series will address that question.

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