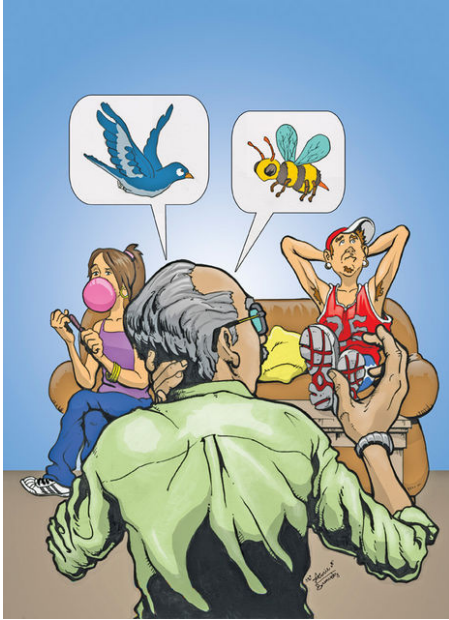


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Let's talk about sex, babies: Parents told to talk to teens

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Teen pregnancy. Sexually transmitted diseases. Erotic media messages.

It's enough to make the hardiest of parents weak in the knees.

But parents cannot afford to put off talking to their kids about sex, says Margaret Palmer, prevention coordinator at Our Family Services in Tucson.

"Talking to teens about sex is still taboo, but it has to become a cultural norm," she says.

The stakes are high, Palmer says:

- 14,676 girls ages 15 to 19 gave birth in Arizona in 2006, at a taxpayer cost of \$138 million;
- 80 percent of unmarried teen moms end up on welfare;
- Only one-third of teen moms will receive a high school diploma;
- Less than 2 percent will earn a college degree by age 30.

To help get the conversations going, Palmer will lead "Honest Talk About Sex," a workshop to help parents and caregivers discuss sex, puberty, peer pressure, self-esteem, media messages and life goals. The workshop is offered twice in October (see box).

The workshop - designed to prevent teen pregnancy and delay early sexual activity - is funded through the Arizona Department of Health Services and Every Voice in Action.

Preventing teen pregnancy starts with developing honest communication within the family, Palmer says.

"You want your kids to always feel comfortable asking you questions and talking to you," she says.

The workshop will offer strategies, including the use of a shared journal, praise notes and family meetings, to improve family communication.

Parents will get a basic education on issues facing teens, as well as information on birth control and sexually transmitted diseases.

Palmer believes it's not enough to teach families about abstinence only.

"When abstinence only is taught in the schools, we see an increase in teen pregnancy and STDs," she says.

She puts information about all birth control options on the table for parents so they can decide what to present to their children.

Palmer also gives a lesson in anatomy and physiology.

"Parents often do not know the names and function of reproductive organs," she says. "Once they are armed with that information, they are more confident in sharing it with kids, and that's what this is all about - building confidence in parents."

Parents will discuss sexual messages their kids are getting through music and other media.

"Music plays such a huge role in people's perception of sex and sexuality," Palmer says. "There has always been a sexual undertone in music, but it's become a little more intense, a little more over the top."

Ideally, sex ed starts at birth, with parents teaching kids about their bodies and not shaming them, Palmer says. Conversations can become more specific about sex when a child is 10 or 11, she suggests.

But for parents who have postponed the conversations, it's not too late.

"You can start the conversation with, 'I really wish we had talked about this earlier,' " Palmer says.

When Tucson tata Mike Ronquillo was raising his kids, he shared information about sex the way his dad shared with him.

"There was very little information," says Ronquillo, 62. "My education about sex from my dad was him giving me a rubber and saying, 'Don't leave home without it.' "

But Ronquillo, who co-facilitates "Honest Talk About Sex," has educated himself, and is comfortable talking to his grandkids about sex.

"Respecting your kids and having them respect you is the key," he says. "We yell at our kids and we cut them short and we don't take out the time for them.

"The better communication you have, the easier it is talking to them about sex and helping them make the right choices," Ronquillo says. "They need to know to respect themselves and know the dangers out there."