



IN FOCUS: FEATURE ARTICLE

## Feelings and Sex

by Heather Boerner, 06.05.07

Sure, sex ed may teach you what body part goes where and when — but does it teach you how you'll feel after hooking up?

Probably, not. Unfortunately, even the most comprehensive sex education usually teaches only the physical parts of sex. Most teens are left to figure out the emotional part by themselves.

### It's All in Your Head

And young people often get confused, says Amber Madison, a former college sex columnist and author of *Hooking Up: A Girl's All-Out Guide to Sex and Sexuality*. When Amber tours college campuses to talk about sex, it's almost always about the emotional aspects of sex. And what she finds most of the time is that teens get confused about whether they're having sex because they want to or whether they're having it because of outside pressure.

On the one hand, Amber says, she's constantly breaking the myth that only boys like sex and only girls want relationships: Many girls Amber meets like how sex feels physically and often, boys want to have a real relationship, she says. On the other hand, Amber's also constantly reminding girls that having sex because they want to be liked by a boy is not a good enough reason to have sex.

"A huge one for girls who are seniors in high school is to lose their virginity and get it over with before they go off to college," she says. "That's not enough."

### Emotional Fallout

Dr. Bonnie Halpern-Felsher, associate professor of pediatrics at the Division of Adolescent Medicine at University of California, San Francisco, co-authored a study looking at how teens feel after sex. The study, published in a recent issue of the *Journal of Pediatrics*, builds on previous research that found teens expect sex to improve their relationships, make them more popular, and make them feel good.

What this study found is that sex can do all those things, but girls are also more likely than boys to feel used and guilty after sex. The study also found:

- Teens experienced more positive feelings after having sex than negative feelings.
- Up to a half of all sexually experienced teens — guys and girls — said they felt used, guilty, or bad about themselves after having sex.
- Boys were twice as likely as girls to feel more popular or good about themselves after having sex.
- Boys were also three times as likely to report that their girlfriend got pregnant and four times as likely as girls to say they got a sexually transmitted infection.
- Teens who had vaginal sex were more likely than teens that had oral sex to have positive feelings after sex.
- Teens who had both vaginal and oral sex were more likely to report feeling pleasure and having stronger relationships as a result. This may be because teens in longer-term and more stable relationships were also having more types of sex.
- Teens who had only oral sex were less likely to feel guilty or to feel used than teens who had vaginal sex. Teens who only had oral sex were also less likely to report getting in trouble with their parents or to have their relationships to get worse afterwards.

### Sex Isn't the Only Answer



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Dr. Halpern-Felsher thinks it's important for adults who teach sex-ed classes to acknowledge that sex feels good. "One of the main findings is that sexual behavior, oral or vaginal, does have benefits to it. That's what teens are reporting to us and what we know as adults," she says. "But separate from the benefits, the question is, is this the right time in your life to be engaging in an intimate act you may not be prepared for? There are other ways to experience intimacy and benefits that do not need to involve sexual behaviors. You also can get popular other ways."

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