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THE MODERN AGE Generation Confused

Cancer vaccines, birth control, emergency contraception -- with all these options, are teens any sexually healthier?

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Leigh Ann Hildebrand talks in a voice loud enough to be heard over the music and conversations at Sneakers, a sports restaurant in San Carlos. She's talking about sex -- specifically, preparing her daughter for a healthy sex life later. To that end, Genevieve, 14, who sits quietly next to her mother, has received the new vaccine for human papillomavirus (HPV) to protect against cervical cancer and is on a waiting list for vaccines against Hepatitis A and B. And Genevieve has received extensive sex education training from Planned Parenthood.

Hildebrand is not worried the vaccines will make her daughter more sexually active. "We give our kids tetanus vaccines and we don't think that's going to make them go out and step on nails," she reasoned. "I know so many people who got STDs the first time they had sex, herpes in particular, and I don't want that to happen to her."

All this sex-positiveness doesn't mean Hildebrand and her daughter are completely comfortable with Genevieve's emerging sexuality. Hildebrand was shocked the first time Genevieve came home and recounted in explicit detail what she had learned in sex ed. She also prohibits her daughter from wearing midriff-bearing shirts or all-black outfits. She regularly checks her children's MySpace pages for appropriateness and reads saved instant message conversations, which she says are surprisingly sexually explicit.

"I joke with my friends that I will be successful as a parent if she or both my children wait longer to have sex than I did," she said. "Not that I was particularly early, but I guess it's hard to imagine my children doing lots of the things I did as a teenager."

Genevieve, who is polite and whose smile throws her round, rosy cheeks into stark relief, talked about her "loud friends" -- the ones who talk about sex all the time and share "weird facts" about sex.

Half-jokingly, she gingerly covered her mother's ears.

A Brave New World

Medical advances make it possible for teens to avoid pregnancies and STDs more effectively than ever before. The new HPV vaccine, Gardasil, protects against four strains of HPV that cause 70 percent of cervical cancer cases. Another HPV vaccine is being developed that would protect against eight strains and up to 90 percent of cervical cancer cases. The vaccines have few side effects and are safe for almost everyone, except those allergic to eggs. Researchers, funded by the National Institutes of Health, are working on a vaccine for herpes that, though years from public use, is effective now only on women.

Teen girls have access to both Depo-provera, a form of implantable birth control they don't have to remember to take, and to prescription-only Plan B, an emergency contraceptive that prevents pregnancy if taken within days of unprotected sex. If you define sexual health as being free of disease or pregnancy, today's teens have the potential to be the healthiest of any in history.

But sexual health is more than that. The World Health Organization defines it as "a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence."

In a country where the president supports abstinence until marriage, "To Catch A Predator" regularly tops the ratings in its timeslot and the raunchy "American Pie" films are hits, parents and teens are trying to navigate a world marked by piety on the one hand and raunch on the other.

"When you have so much stress and emotional baggage around a topic, you're not thinking clearly," said Claire Brindis, who has studied teenage pregnancy in California and is acting director of UCSF's Institute for Health Policy Studies. "There's this gap between the advances of technology and where we are as a society. There are these new technologies -- the availability of Plan B and now the HPV vaccine -- but parents and teenagers themselves have to learn how to navigate in uncharted terrain."

What fills that gap is sexual schizophrenia: lots of flash and little of substance to help teens understand desire and how to navigate the tricky world of first relationships.

It's a world, said Dr. Deborah Tolman, a professor at San Francisco State University and director of the University's Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality, where the old double-speak of encouraging girls to be sexy but not sexual is made more extreme by ever-tighter clothes and virginity pledges. Even in the Bay Area, where teens have more options than most, they learn little about real sex, sex that's complicated because it's about both intimacy and anatomy.

"Sexual health doesn't just mean saying no," said Tolman, author of "Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk About Sexuality." "It might mean that, but it also might mean that a teen wants to have sexual experiences that don't involve anyone's genitals. We don't teach kids about desire. Desire is very pleasurable in and of itself. Learning about it is a wonderful part of adolescence, but we have this

slippery slope mentality that if we talk to teens about it, they'll go out and have sex. But most teens aren't sex addicts."

Learning about desire -- what feels good to you, what you like and don't like and being able to say it -- is a "primary task of adolescence," Tolman says, and a key to adult sexual health. The ability to identify what you like sexually and what feels like coercion and violence is a big part of sexual health. But Tolman's research has found that teens -- especially teen girls, who have been the target of abstinence-only education long before it became de rigueur for both sexes -- internalize the message that they aren't supposed to be sexual at all. And then sex "just happens."

"For both boys and girls, desire and sexuality is how we integrate the emotional, intellectual and physical parts of ourselves," she said. "That's the kind of thing we need the curriculum for."

A sign of our sexual schizophrenia is how little the worry about teen sex corresponds to what teens are actually doing. A recent study by the New York-based Guttmacher Institute found that teens were waiting longer to have sex in 2002 than they did in 1995, and when they did have sex, they were far more likely to use protection.

California also went from having one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the country in 1988 to below the national average. Nationally, the teen pregnancy rate dropped 25 percent; in California, teen pregnancy dropped by 38 percent. Dr. Tina Raine-Bennett, an OB/GYN, researcher and director of UCSF's teen-oriented New Generation Health Clinic, attributed much of that decrease to the popularity of Depo-provera.

"Teen pregnancy rates have sharply declined in the past 10 years," said Raine-Bennett. "In California, the decline has been greater than the U.S. overall. It's quite amazing."

The Parent Trap

Palo Alto Medical Foundation Research Institute researcher Nancy Brown teaches parents how to talk to their kids about sex at regular workshops. A big part of that is teaching parents about teen desire.

"Once a teen is fully pubescent, a boy is having at least seven surges of testosterone a day," she said. "There's probably not a 13-year-old girl who hasn't experienced vaginal wetness or tingling breasts. Thirteen-year-old girls may not know what's going on, but they are experiencing sexual feelings. These are normal biological processes. We can't ignore it and hope (our kids) will avoid it (sex)."

When she teaches classes on talking to teens about sex, she advises parents to struggle through the stuttering, the blushes and the resistance -- their own. Be clear about how you want your teen to behave: Almost universally, it's don't have sex. "But you have to understand that they may do it anyway."

"Teens are so starved for information," she said. "We don't help teens understand that that tingly,

floaty feeling is your hormones. It's not love. We don't talk about excitement and stimulation and pleasure. That creates a huge void for kids. They're left to react to their bodies, to being sexual, without our help."

Even Brown, however, admits to feeling of two minds about teen sex. On the one hand, she said she knows as a sex educator that "there's nothing wrong with a teen having sex if it is consensual, non-coercive and completely protected." On the other hand, as the mother of 11- and 14-year-old daughters, "My motherly sense is that a 13-year-old can't consent."

Many people try to ignore teen sex, often out of benign discomfort with the topic. Bay Area teens have more options than most for getting accurate, non-biased sexual health information. For instance, UCSF's New Generation Clinic caters to teens; Girls, Inc. of Alameda County's Helping Everyone Achieve Respect Together (HEART) peer education program educates girls about relationships, sexuality and sex and then invites their members to educate other teens; and the gay teen group Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center (LYRIC) provides a safe outlet for teens to question their sexuality.

But that doesn't mean most teens are getting thorough sex education. Many teens who talked to The Chronicle said they got spotty sex education at school. Many turned to Planned Parenthood. Others, like Kaitlin Jones, 16, of Castro Valley, learned more from Girls, Inc.'s HEART program than they did in school.

A recent issue of Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health reported that teens are getting less education today about all forms of sex education -- including contraception and abstinence-only -- than they were in 1995. It also found that teens who live in inner cities receive less education on birth control and more information on abstinence-only than teens in suburbs. About one in five rural teen girls received only abstinence education. Fourteen-year-old Kayla Wheatfield of Oakland has received that message loud and clear. Her grandmother, who is raising her, is adamant about her waiting to have sex until she's much older. The family regularly attends City of the Lord Zion Assembly of God Church and believes in abstinence. Kayla received most of her sex education from Girls, Inc.'s HEART program.

"Growing up in a world that's based on sex and male dominance, it's not surprising to see a girl as just half-naked in a video," Kayla said. "We do get mixed messages. We see all the time, 'Use condoms,' like on ads, but we hear, 'Don't have sex unless you're in a committed relationship.'"

Kayla's not allowed to date yet but she is allowed to have a "guy friend who can call up and talk if he's respectful." She has such a friend, one her friends at school say she looks good with. But they also ask the 14-year-old all the time if she's "done it" with him yet.

Kayla brushes off those questions with "We aren't even dating yet!" But she also feels like sex isn't an option -- not because she's not attracted to the guy, but because her grandmother won't allow it.

"Don't be coming up in here with no babies at 16," Kayla recites, repeating her grandmother's admonition.

"Or at 17 or 18 or 19," Gloria Glenn, Kayla's grandmother, deadpanned with a faint laugh.

"A lot of girls at my school have gotten pregnant and had babies in the last year," Kayla said. "Some had abortions, but some had babies. And now the girls are called hos."

For now, Kayla's goals are to graduate from high school and go to UC Berkeley, UCLA or Spellman College. Her favorite subject is science.

"I'm not confused," she said resolutely. "I just kind of listen to both sides. I have kind of decided for myself that I'm not going to have sex until I'm older. But there are all kinds of different options."

Glenn is glad about that, but she also worries about her granddaughter. Glenn's mother got pregnant at 16; Glenn herself had her daughter at 19 and Kayla's mother had Kayla at 24. Glenn doesn't want that to happen to Kayla. She's glad the HPV vaccine, Depo-provera and Plan B are there. But she doesn't want her daughter to have to use them.

"It's certainly a challenge for any mother to guide and try to direct her child in this world," said Glenn. "I tell her, 'If you want a life of poverty, have sex too early.' I'm happy to have those technological advances because at a certain point she'll make the decision to have sex. But I just hope she doesn't make that choice because she wants a boy to like her. And if she's doing it based on herself, on what she wants, I want her to think about why she's doing it."

Glenn is frustrated, she said, by a world that's both more sexual and, seemingly, more sexist.

"I despise all of that," she said.

Kayla feels that pressure, too. Recently, Kayla said a girl at her school was harassed so badly by other girls for being a 'ho' that she transferred schools.

As long as the debate is only about what girls do, sexual health will be a pipe dream, said UCSF's Brindis.

"One thought is, if we had more ease about sex, why shouldn't we give young men Plan B? People jump to these worst stereotyped images where, if you give a man Plan B, he's going to coerce that girl into having sex and force her to use it. I'm not advocating throwing out Plan B like candy on Halloween. I'm saying, 'How do we protect both young men and young women? How do we stress responsible sexual behaviors? How do we stress the mutuality of sex? How do we raise young men who care and value women?' I have two sons so I can say to you I have tried to raise them with the level of sensitivity to say, 'You may have sexual needs, but you have a responsibility to this other person.' See? Where's the message about mutuality?"

"That's where I think there's huge gaps between the tools of technology and the messages we're giving to young people."

Freelance writer Heather Boerner (www.heatherboerner.com) has written about health for Alternative Medicine Magazine, Curve Magazine and Planned Parenthood's online publications, Choice! Magazine Online and teenwire.com.

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