

# HOME ECONOMICS

# GUIDE

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## Adolescent Sexuality

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The physical changes that occur in early adolescence are likely to bring on new thoughts and feelings in young persons. As growth spurts occur and sexual feelings emerge, adolescents experience feelings that they may not know how to understand and have some concerns about managing.

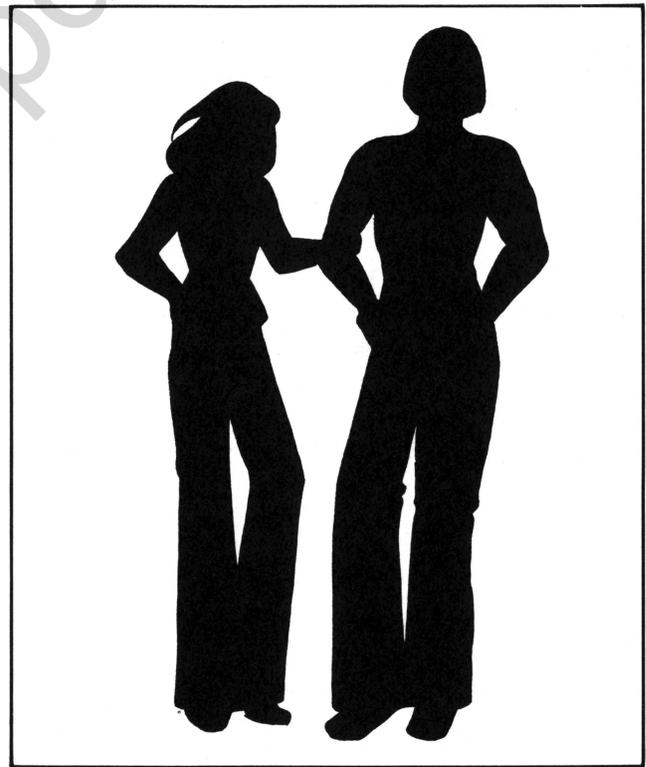
### Uncertainty

There will likely be uncertainty about what is happening to them. Questions arise. What is happening to me? Am I supposed to have these feelings? Am I normal? Is there something wrong with me? Is there something different about me? Since puberty develops at different times for adolescents there is not much reassurance by comparisons with others. Growth spurts, pubic hair, breast development, and change of voice will occur much earlier in some. Further questions come up. How come I am so different from other boys? Why am I not more like some of these other girls? Other questions relate to the adolescent's uncertainty about dealing with the changes. How do I deal with these new feelings? Can I manage them? How am I supposed to feel about all of this?

Parents and other adults can be most helpful at this time. Information on different growth rates may be reassuring, but acceptance and understanding are far more important. Belittling the concerns of the adolescent only tends to complicate matters. As this is likely to be the time for the emerging search for independence, a great deal of understanding and support by parents can be helpful.

### Guilt

Our society has done a rather effective job in making adolescents, and most everyone else, feel guilty about erotic thoughts and sexual feelings. Coming from a cultural emphasis on sex as an unmanageable force to be accepted only for purposes of perpetuation of the species, children learn to feel guilty about a normal aspect of their



lives. Silenced for curiosity, spanked for exploration of their genitals, and monitored for evidence of masturbation, they learn that this area of life is just somehow different from all of the others.

Sexual feelings are natural and evidence healthy normal growth. They are a most important aspect of life and add a dimension that enhances all of life—or at least can do so if not distorted by negative influences. John Gagnon says that sexual feelings are not as a chained beast struggling to dominate. They are rather the result of *scripted* behavior.<sup>1</sup> Life writes a scenario pulling together earliest experiences to create a script for us. Management of sexual feelings and control of behavior are more likely with this concept rather than one based on fear of ability to cope.

Adolescents need reassurance that not only are these feelings normal but might well be greeted with pleasure. The first “wet dream” and the first signs of menstruation are both causes for celebration.

## Parents Are Important

Reference has been made to the key role parents can play at this time. Their attitude toward their own sexuality is, and always has been, influential in the development of the child and adolescent. Gagnon says kids get their attitudes from home, their knowledge from each other.<sup>2</sup> If the parent sees sexuality as an enhancing element of a person’s life, as an expression of energy adding zest to life and not see it as a force for evil to be submerged or repressed, fear and guilt on the part of the adolescent can be minimized.

Many see our preoccupation with genital sex and its expression—from jokes to exploitations—as really anti-sexual, a denial of the more positive and life enhancing aspects of our sexuality.<sup>3</sup> It can be as much in our control as our other drives—more so than hunger and thirst.<sup>4</sup>

If parents can be models for open attitudes toward their own sexuality, they then can do much more for their adolescents than lectures or diagrams on reproduction. Eleanor Luckey has said, “If the adults who touch the lives of children could determine what their own values are...and if they could demonstrate them in their daily living, children would get the message.”<sup>5</sup> Keeping lines of communication open is both difficult and important. This means listening. It also means honest acceptance of the adolescent’s feelings and concerns.

Parents can help children and adolescents see sexuality as an expression of personality. We express ourselves through our sexual behavior: love, hate, fear, dominance, proof. These needs stem from our total being, not from our sexual drives. They are expressed through sexual outlets. Sex is not something we do, but something we are.

Parents contribute to these basic psychological needs by the environment they provide for their teens. Not only the physical environment but more important the emotional environment, the human climate. A climate of care, concern, love, encouragement and acceptance will do more for sexual management than all of the admonitions, scoldings, and restrictions. However, this climate should include a model by the parents and a sense of expectation as to appropriate behavior. It doesn’t really have to be spelled out. Kids know what parents expect. Sensible and appropriate limits will help kids know you

care, that underlying the open acceptance there are some behaviors our family does not believe appropriate.

## Relations With Peers

In a time of conflicting and uncertain values and standards it is likely that people look to see what others are doing as part of the basis for their own decisions. Teenagers, more than any other age group, are very aware of what the peers are doing, particularly in the area of sexual behavior.

There is much speculation as to what the others are doing. Bragging, exaggerating, appearing experienced may all be cloaks to cover uncertainty. Many youth attempt sexual moves that they are not really comfortable making. A sexual advance is often considered the in thing, a way of proving one’s adequacy, and an exploration of a new dimension of one’s life.

Peer influence can be supportive of responsible behavior or, of course, it can encourage irresponsible behavior. Those teens who come from a warm accepting home where responsible behavior is expected at least have some idea where they are going, some goals for the future, however tentative—these are the peers who can best be supportive of responsible sexual behavior. They do not want problems stemming from sexual matters fouling things up. Responsible behavior for some may be abstinence, for others petting short of intercourse, and for others intelligent use of contraceptives.

## What Kind of Sex Education?

Teens today may have more sexual experiences than those of a generation ago and they may talk more openly about matters formerly spoken in private. But despite this increase in exposure to sexual matters there is still need for basic reproductive information as a beginning. Studies show, for example, that despite sex education programs in schools many teens do not understand the relationship between the menstrual cycle and the time most likely for fertilization.<sup>6</sup>

Facts are needed. Ignorance has not in the past nor will in the future deter sexual behavior. Ignorance only adds to the likelihood of unwanted complications. But equally important is the need to go beyond thinking of sex as “something you do” and considering it as “something you are.” A very important aspect of sex education is, therefore, a consideration of self-image, communication, and interpersonal relationships. How teens feel about their self-worth, how they perceive their relationships both with adults and peers, how they have learned to

communicate their feelings and concerns will influence how they may use sex to fulfill personality needs.

A dignified, not austere, comfortable environment will provide teens a much needed opportunity to talk about interests, fears, uncertainties with an accepting and understanding adult and peers who share many similar questions. Free and honest expressions of concerns can be shared with others. Myths and fallacies can be exposed. Any topic is appropriate: masturbation, intercourse, sexual excesses, homosexuality, venereal disease, perversion. No predetermined answers are given, no moral stances imposed by the teacher.

Lester Kirkendall, a pioneer in working with teens and sexuality, came up with some goals of sex education as offered by the teens themselves.<sup>7</sup>

1. To provide whatever **factual information** the individual desires on all aspects of sex.
2. To increase **self-understanding** so that individuals may become **self-confident** members of their own sex.
3. To increase **understanding of the opposite sex** in order to promote positive relationships between the sexes.
4. To **understand better other patterns** of sex behavior among peers, within the adult generation, and in other cultures, so as to prepare individuals to live with others who believe differently.
5. To **open up communication** and promote understanding between adults and youth.
6. To develop an **appreciation of sex as an integral part of life** and see it in the perspective of one's

whole life.

7. To allow and enable **each individual to develop a personal standard** based on understanding of and concern for others.
8. To provide a **continuous educational process** which will **prepare individuals, mentally and emotionally, for their biological development through maturity.**

Mary Calderone, long-time advocate for sex education, stated for the 1979 International Year of the Child:

Young people have a right to know...should have the right of a sense of ownership of their own bodies. They need experiences that heighten their own bodily awareness—swimming, running on the beach, sensuous experiences, dancing. They must know that sex is for pleasure as well as for procreation so that at appropriate times they can express what they want to say other than in words—but at all times responsibly.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gagnon, John and Simon, John, "Psychosexual Development", *The Sexual Scene*, Transaction Books, 1969, p. 24, 25.

<sup>2</sup>Gagnon, John, "Sexuality and Sexual Learnings in the Young Child", *Psychiatry*, August 1965, p. 223.

<sup>3</sup>Gordon, Sol, "Tomorrow's Family", *Journal of Current Social Issues*, Spring 1978, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup>Gagnon, John and Simon, op. cit. p. 24, 25.

<sup>5</sup>Lucky, Eleanor, "Helping Children Grow Up Sexually", *Children*, July/August 1967.

<sup>6</sup>Presser, Harriet, "Guessing and Misinformation About Pregnancy Risk Among Urban Mothers", *Family Planning Perspectives*, May/June 1977.

<sup>7</sup>Kirkendall, Lester, "Basic Issues in Sex Education", *Psychiatry*, August 1965.

<sup>8</sup>Golden, Doris, "Mary Calderone: Children Have a Right to Know", *Impact, Journal of National Family Sex Education Week*, 1978.

