Talking About Sex and Sexuality With Adolescent Victims or Survivors of Sexual Abuse or Assault

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QUICKIES!

• When I say “sex,” I don’t mean intercourse (or gender). When I say sex, I mean any mutually wanted, shared, active expression of sexuality or sexual desire.

• I do not consider rape sex, a message I urge you to give to those you serve when talking about either. Rape is not any kind of expression of a victim’s sexuality. It is not a shared or active expression of their desire. At best, it is sex for the perpetrator only (but even that’s problematic). Just like being mugged and willingly giving someone some money are not the same, neither are rape or sex the same.
Key Domains of Healthy Sexual Development

- Freedom from unwanted activity
- An understanding of consent, and ethical conduct more generally
- Education about biological aspects of sexual practice
- An understanding of safety
- Relationship skills
- Agency
- Lifelong learning
Key Domains of Healthy Sexual Development

- Resilience
- Open communication
- Sexual development should not be ‘aggressive, coercive or joyless’
- Self-acceptance
- Awareness and acceptance that sex can be pleasurable
- Understanding of parental and societal values
- Awareness of public/private boundaries
- Competence in mediated sexuality
To Think About:

• What are some areas of healthy sexual development you may have thought were only issues for survivors, but may be challenges for everyone?
• What are some areas of healthy sexual development you think you can help survivors with well? What areas might be more challenging for you?
• What are some areas where you are still learning a lot yourself?
• What might survivors even be better equipped to manage or understand than non-survivors?
Young People’s Sexuality and Its Social Contexts Right Now

• A majority of people — as has been the case in the U.S. for over 100 years — engage in sex before or without marriage. A majority of young people do or will engage in some form of sexual expression with a partner by their late teens.

• Most teens explore sex within romantic relationships, but these are often short, lasting weeks, months or less than one year. The younger teens are, the shorter sexual/romantic relationships tend to be.

• Teens typically have penis-in-vagina genital intercourse — if they do — later (the average age is 17-18) than teens of the last couple previous generations. But age when puberty starts is earlier and average age of first marriage later.
• Social status is often a high motivation for sex, though this is more likely common among cisgender boys/men and heterosexual teens (or those who wish to appear so).

• First sexual experiences (particularly with intercourse) are often described as having been “unwanted sex” by around 25% of young people, with somewhat more girls or women reporting this as men and boys. The younger a person is, the more often sexual debuts are reported as unwanted.

• Outcomes from sex among teens in the US are often more negative — e.g., unwanted pregnancy, STI transmission, or abuse — than in other developed nations, despite similar rates of sexual activity at similar ages. Despite our pregnancy rate being at a historic low in 2011, it and STI rates will probably rise again under the current administration.
• Around 11% of youth identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, and slightly more (16%) have engaged in same-gender sexual activity.
• In 2015, at school, 85.2% of LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students experienced verbal harassment; nearly 50% were physically harassed; around 25% physically assaulted. 48.6% experienced electronic harassment; 59.6% were sexually harassed.
• Many school policies still do not protect or outrightly target LGBTQ students.
• When schools provide sex education, much of it is still not inclusive, and abstinence-based curriculum often demonize or pathologize LGBTQ identities or behaviors. (GLSEN 2015 National School Climate Survey.)
• A lot of sex education — including some comprehensive, fact-based sex ed — also stigmatizes or does not consider victims or survivors of sexual assault
• As in generations previous, young people often overestimate how many of their peers are engaging in sex, and frequently peers are not honest with each other about their sexuality or sexual activity.

• Comfort talking about sex is often — when there is comfort at all - limited to talking “sexy.” More young people often comfortable with performing sexuality, and/or engaging is sexual activity than communicating in words.

• Survivors often do not want to share that they have been assaulted or abused with partners, particularly if they, their culture or their partners idolize (or demand) virginity and/or stigmatize sexual abuse or assault victims or survivors.

• Cell phones, webcams and the internet are core parts of youth sexuality, sex and relationships.
Some sexual issues survivors may struggle with:

- PTSD, trauma cues ("triggers") or body memories during or around sex or other intimacy: can be more likely in the most intimate/close relationships
- Difficulty building trust or investing trust soundly and choosing trustworthy partners
- Asking partners for wants/needs they have because of or related to surviving abuse or their healing process
- Difficulty understanding what real consent and understanding consent must be respected in healthy sexual interactions
• Sex as self-harm
• Fear of consensual sexual activity becoming abuse or assault, in the moment or overall
• A view of sex or sexuality is defined or only understood as sexual violence
• Staying present, not “numbing out”
• 93% of juvenile sexual assault victims know their attacker: you may wind up talking about sex with the same person who victimized your client.
• Sexual shame or sexualization; seeing oneself as sexually broken or as only being valuable as a sexual object or provider.
To Think About:

• How can you support survivors in sex and sexuality with positive messaging while still addressing challenges?
• How can you talk about current and past sexual culture without creating or enabling absolutes?
• How can you model good consent and other healthy, intimate interactions in your interactions with survivors?
BREAKING THE HUSH FACTOR

Ten Rules for Talking with Teenagers about Sex by Dr. Karen Rayne

**Rule 1: Know Yourself**
The center of a circle is its balance point. The balance of my relationships is at my center. I know my center. I can begin.

**Rule 2: It’s Not About You**
Discovery is such a beautiful thing, and there is so much more to find, learn, and understand!

**Rule 3: Stop Talking**
The other that is mysterious continues to draw me in, and I am learning to explore gently, kindly, and with compassion.

**Rule 4: Start Listening**
I listen from the quiet parts in me to the quiet parts in others.

**Rule 5: You Get One Question**
To pause, wait, and consider is to offer the gift of the space between the stars so that the brightest one can shine.

**Rule 6: Do Something Else**
Conversation is an act of creation, and we can create together.

**Rule 7: Pleasure and Pain**
The heights and the depths, they both hold truths, and must be welcomed.

**Rule 8: Be Cool As A Cucumber**
I am as deep as the ocean. I am as timeless as the stones. I breathe in and I breathe out.

**Rule 9: Bring It On**
I embody bravery, inside and out. I am as unshackled as the stars. I trust in myself.

**Rule 10: Never Surrender**
"The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart." — Albert Camus
These five are the most important for this kind of work:

- Know yourself.
- Remember that it’s not about you.
- Start listening! (This also helps with boundaries and can give you important cues!)
- About pleasure and pain
- Bring it on. Or, especially in this case: be as brave as they are.
Some Last Tips Specific to Survivors:

• Be gentle and tread lightly when identifying sex and sexuality issues that may be connected to previous abuse or assault.

• Remember that this young person is not only an assault survivor: they are also a young person like everyone else.

• Help with sex and intimacy pacing.

• Again: I encourage you not to conflate sexual assault and abuse with sex.

• Be supportive of their relationships.

• Focus on, support and believe in their strength.
THANK YOU!

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