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# Foreword

By Meg Meeker, M.D., Pediatrician and author

**A**bstinence. The mere mention of the word makes many of our generation roll their eyes and wince, believing that those who teach sexual abstinence to teens have no right to impose moral or religious values on the next generation—even if it includes our own kids. But as a physician, let me tell you that abstinence is not a moral or religious issue—it is now, in the 21st century, a medical necessity.

I'll be honest; I practiced medicine on teens for over 10 years feeling that abstinence was puritanical and unsophisticated. I prescribed oral contraceptives, pushed condom usage and routinely gave shots of Depo-Provera. But in my upper-middle-class practice, teens came back one after another, not pregnant, but with sexually transmitted diseases (most of which they never knew they had), and depression; and the numbers of precancerous cervical changes (a direct result of HPV) in younger and younger girls skyrocketed.

Our teens are being trained into a world of sexual promiscuity through the aggressive marketing of sex. Teaching them to use condoms doesn't help them negotiate this toxic sexual culture, and it fails to adequately protect them from depression and many life-threatening diseases.

Many believe that teaching sexual abstinence is naïve and that those who teach it aren't living in the "real world." Well, I know it works. Look at the "gold standard" of abstinence teaching in America—Alcoholics Anonymous. We would never tell someone with a profoundly strong physiologic urge to take a drink to avoid drinking, but if he or she fails, to drink light beer. We teach them *not* to drink and then we teach them *how* not to drink. Giving teens condoms is like telling them to drink light beer. In the midst of a medical epidemic of diseases, we need to teach the same to our teens about avoiding sexual activity.

Abstinence. Is it realistic and right for your kids? You bet it is. For me, teaching abstinence to my patients is the only way I can practice good medicine. And for you, it's the only way to practice great parenting. That's why you need to read ***Doin' it Right: A Parent's Guide to Healthy Futures***. Then you need to read it again and act. I'll guarantee, you will save your teen a lot of heartache.

# “Abstinence? Can we really do this?”

In the 21st century, it's easy for a parent to think that sexual abstinence is simply not “realistic”—that no teen in today's world could manage such a thing.

Most popular television shows, most TV news and information broadcasts, and most major newspapers and magazines teach or imply that:

- ➔ Teens will have sex no matter what.
- ➔ The best way to handle the topic is by telling teens about “responsible” decision-making, so you can teach your children how to avoid getting a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or pregnant.
- ➔ You should teach your teens how to use condoms.
- ➔ You should instruct your teenager about “responsible” ways to experiment sexually, short of actual intercourse.

With this agenda, abstinence sounds more than a little ridiculous, doesn't it? Yet, those are the essential messages of the current “realistic” sex education movement.

Most of these messages, however, are simply not true.

**“I didn't realize how much the TV shows I watch had sex in them.”**

— 15-year-old boy



## **In fact, abstinence is at least as popular as sex among teenagers.**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior survey for 2001, more than half (54 percent) of high school students had never had sex. Only about a third (33 percent) of students responded that they were “currently

sexually active”—that is, that they had had sexual intercourse with one or more persons in the preceding three months.

Among the “in-between” results are the 26.7 percent of respondents who said they had had a sexual encounter in the past but had not had sex in the previous three months. An earlier CDC study in 2000 found that 35 percent of students graduated as virgins.

**“The best way to avoid STDs is abstinence; even a condom is not 100% safe from diseases.”**

— 17-year-old boy

## **The STD Epidemic—What Is It, and How Bad Is It?**

Humorist P.J. O'Rourke observed, “The sexual revolution is over. The microbes won.”

We're all too familiar with those microbes today: HIV/AIDS, genital herpes, chlamydia, increasingly drug-resistant strains of gonorrhea and syphilis. And you should know that latex condoms aren't particularly effective in preventing the spread of many STDs.

Some statistics are in order:

In 1999, according to the director of the National Cancer Institute, 20 million women had human papillomavirus (HPV), which is now known to cause 99% of all cervical cancer. Some 30-50

million people suffer from genital herpes, a number hard to determine because of the nature of the infection. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a quarter of all new HIV cases are contracted by youth less than 21 years of age. One in ten active teenage homosexual males is already infected with HIV.



## Condoms do not work as well as we are taught to believe.

*Scientific Evidence on Condom Effectiveness for Sexually Transmitted Disease Prevention*, a federal government report, was released in 2001 by the National Institutes of Health and endorsed by the CDC, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

According to the report, while latex condoms used properly did provide a high level of protection against the transmission of HIV/AIDS, there was not enough evidence to support their effectiveness against most other STDs. For instance, the report states that condoms provided only “some risk reduction” for gonorrhea in men; “no clinical proof of effectiveness” was found for women.

Whatever protection condoms offer is provided only with consistent use. According to the CDC, consistent condom use “means using a condom every time you have sex—100% of the time—no exceptions.... Used inconsistently, condoms offer little more protection than when they are not used at all.”

Are condoms used properly and consistently? A summary article from the *American Journal of Public Health* stated that in “national surveys and other large scale studies, only 5-17 percent of individuals reported using condoms for each episode of intercourse. In smaller, less representative studies, 29-41 percent reported using condoms for every sexual contact during the time periods studied.”

### It's more than just disease...

The Heritage Foundation recently published a study showing that depression and suicide were far more common among teens who have sex than among teens who don't.



**“There are other ways to show your love than sexual activity.”**

**— 15-year-old boy**

**“Porn really  
messes up  
your head.”**

**— 15-year-old boy**

The study said that early sexual activity “is a substantial factor in undermining the emotional well-being of American teenagers.”

Kirk A. Johnson, one of the study’s authors, told *The Washington Times*, “A lot of the safe-sex curricula in schools today are very focused on physical health aspects. We think [this] safe-sex message to adolescents fails to adequately communicate the emotional risks involved in early sexual experimentation. Clearly, having more of an abstinence message is going to alleviate those concerns.”

### **Not just intercourse...**

Unhealthy teen sexual activity is not just limited to intercourse. Two new practices are growing among teens. First, oral sex is increasing. “Our anecdotal evidence shows that kids think [oral sex] is considerably safer behavior than vaginal sex,” commented Cory Richards, of Alan Guttmacher Institute, in *USA Today*. “In some respects it is. The risk of pregnancy is not there. But the risk of STDs is definitely there.” Some kids are choosing oral sex because they think it is a “safe” alternative, and they are wrong. Any STD that can be transmitted through vaginal sex can also be transmitted through oral sex.

Unfortunately, oral sex has become very common, even casual, among many teens. Reports have even surfaced of oral sex “trains” and parties. According to a *Washington Post* article, in 1999 oral sex was becoming more common among middle-school-aged students, and a later article in April 2000 quoted one psychologist as saying that oral sex was “like a good-night kiss to [middle-school students].”

Second, cyber-sex is a recent trend that is posing a threat to teens. It can take place in any chat room on the Internet, not just on pornographic websites. The danger may be primarily emotional, but, when graphic words and images are exchanged on the Internet, a destructive



attitude toward sexual activity can be formed. Not to mention, online conversations can result in physical encounters that are potentially dangerous and sometimes even deadly as adult sexual predators search online for their next victims.

### And what about pregnancy?

Although the pregnancy rate for teens has declined somewhat recently, there are still approximately one million teenage pregnancies every year. The decline is most likely due to the increased use of oral and injectable contraceptives. And kids who use these protections from pregnancy are often not using condoms.

Latex condoms are said to provide pregnancy prevention rates as high as 98 percent. The FDA, however, which classifies condoms as medical devices (and therefore regulates them), says the rate of pregnancy resulting from condom use is about 14 percent overall.

Many methods are being attempted to counter the above statistics on STDs and pregnancy. Kids are taught how to use condoms, condoms are made readily available through school health clinics, teenage girls are advised to take birth control pills, etc. Although condoms have been widely promoted for many years, the STD rate for teens has shown little improvement.

**“The decisions  
that you make  
now will affect  
you later!”**

— 16-year-old girl



**“I never knew there were emotional consequences.”**

**— 14-year-old girl**

### **“Alternative” or “responsible” sex just means more sex.**

The Sexuality Information and Educational Council of the U.S. (SIECUS) is the largest organization promoting “comprehensive sexuality education” in our nation’s schools. A number of other organizations, including the CDC, also endorse this kind of sex education.

What does comprehensive sexuality education entail? In the comprehensive model, “alternative” sexual activity plays a prominent part. Here, for example, are some of the SIECUS guidelines for comprehensive sexuality education programs for children ages 5 to 8:

“Boys and girls have body parts that feel good when touched.”

“Vaginal intercourse occurs when a man and woman place the penis inside the vagina.”

“Touching and rubbing one’s own genitals to feel good is called masturbation.”

A comprehensive sexuality education program promoted by the CDC called “Focus on Kids” includes the following in its curriculum for children and teens ages 9 to 15:

“There are many ways to be close. The list may include...body massage, bathing together, masturbation, sensuous feeding, fantasizing, watching erotic movies, reading erotic books and magazines.”

Is that the kind of education you want for your son or daughter?





## What alternatives are there?

It's dangerous out there, especially when our teens do not learn about the physical and emotional damage that can occur from premature sexual activity. Abstinence works, 100 percent of the time. Abstinence prevents STDs, 100 percent. Abstinence prevents pregnancy, 100 percent. At the same time, it empowers teens to make healthy decisions and teaches them to respect themselves and their bodies.

And there's more good news. Recently, the federal government has begun to provide funding for abstinence education in public schools. You may have to do some work to make sure that your school system takes part. There are organizations to assist your efforts, from the government on down—organizations that have been promoting abstinence for years and know how. You can find a list of some of these organizations in the resource section of this guide.

Plus, the trend in teen abstinence is your friend. As documented in a number of magazine and newspaper articles, including a recent cover article in *Newsweek*, more and more teens are choosing abstinence. So take heart: You will not have to do this alone.

Now, how can you and your teen get started?



**“You can wait  
to have sex.”**

**— 14-year-old boy**

## You and Your Teen—And Sex

**R**emember, the *teenager* is an invention of modern American society.

Throughout most of human history, *teen marriage* and *parenthood* were common, a reflection of a much shorter lifespan. *Teenagers* experience the *sexual urge* very powerfully, probably more powerfully than they will ever again in their lives.

*Teenagers* also experience the *sexual urge* more powerfully than their parents. They may well ask their parents, “What do you know?” And they deserve answers. So what’s the best way to give them?

**“I learned not to let someone pressure me.”**

— 13-year-old girl

### The Talk

**Teens Talk:** “It felt so good to finally stand up for something and to not care what other people think. I was proud to tell people about my decision!”



Most parents will be a little scared of talking to their teen about sex. But if you’re reading this pamphlet, you are already ahead of the game. You have undoubtedly seen other parents who don’t seem sure of themselves, who can’t seem to set limits or guidelines for their children.

But that’s not you. You care enough to tell your children that you think some things are right or good and some things are wrong or inappropriate. You have made your approval—and your disapproval—of these and other behaviors clear since your children were toddlers.

That's important. Organizations that study trends in teenage sexual behavior say that the single most important factor in helping a teen stay abstinent is parental disapproval of teen sex. If you really do disapprove of teens having sex, and if your teen knows that clearly, you've already won half the battle.

And remember, during adolescence you are guiding your teen through the difficult and often complicated process of becoming an adult. You want your teen to make healthy decisions in the area of sexuality, but they will need your help to do that.

Now some tips about "the talk" itself:

- ➔ **Take it easy.** Don't try to cover everything at once. "The talk" can and should be several conversations. You'll want to have a talk about puberty much earlier than one about dating expectations, for example. Girls today begin puberty around the age of 10, and boys around the age of 12, but most parents don't want their 5th graders dating so that discussion can wait!
- ➔ **Make time.** Don't try to squeeze these conversations into a few minutes driving to soccer practice. Consider regularly setting aside time to do something with your teen that he or she enjoys, and then ask a few intentional questions. The consistency of time spent together will make your teen feel more comfortable. Make sure you ask open-ended questions, not questions to which you are expecting a certain answer. Assure your teen that your conversation is confidential, and affirm your teen's feelings as legitimate.



**"It's never too late to turn back."**

— 13-year-old boy



➔ **Set boundaries for your teen** around issues like dating, curfew, the age when it's okay to group date versus couple date, being in houses without parents home, respect for his or her body, and what to do if alcohol or drugs appear at a party. Rules in these circumstances will help your teen to know what is appropriate and can even be their excuse to get out of an uncomfortable situation!

➔ **Listen, don't just talk.** Ask your teen about his or her friends, what other kids are doing and what kind of pressure he or she is facing. And really listen when your teen tells you about these things. Try not

to act shocked, and consider not offering advice unless they ask for it. This will help create a safe space in your relationship for your teen to be honest, and over time he or she will probably open up more personally.

### The Pledge and the Token

Parental values are important to a teen's commitment to abstinence. There are two other elements that help reinforce the abstinence message.

First, the *pledge*: a written promise to abstain from sexual activity until marriage. If your teen wants to commit to abstinence, signing a pledge together encourages him or her to take this decision seriously. An abstinence pledge can be an effective tool to help your teen remember his or her commitment to say "no" when the pressure gets strong.

For example, Robert E. Rector, of the Heritage Foundation, recently reported that an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* shows that "abstinence pledge" programs are dramatically effective in reducing sexual activity among teenagers in grades 7 through 12. Based on a large national sample of adolescents, the study

**"It's important to save sex for your husband so that all your heart will be with him."**

— 14-year-old girl

concludes that “Adolescents who reported having taken a pledge to remain a virgin were at significantly lower risk of early age of sexual debut.”

A sample pledge and card are included inside the cover of this guide. You can find many other examples of such pledges by doing a simple Internet search. Many parents also give their teen a ring or some other token of his or her commitment, as do several national abstinence movements.

**Teens Talk:** “Every time I’m tempted, having something concrete on my hand is a constant reminder of my reason for waiting and it gives me the strength to stand up for myself.”

Rings as symbols date back thousands of years. The ring’s circle symbolizes that something will be enclosed within—and something else kept out. For graduates of service academies or military schools, the ring symbolizes a commitment to a code of honor and discipline and a bond with fellow graduates. In its most famous role—“With this ring I thee wed”—the ring symbolizes a commitment between a man and a woman in marriage.

Because rings are used so often with abstinence pledges, it seems clear that the outward symbol aids in the commitment. Rings are valuable, and can be engraved, for example, with a date. A ring serves as a constant reminder to your teen of his or her commitment, and is also a public statement of his or her pledge. When your teen sees another teen wearing a ring, it can act as a symbol of solidarity—pretty important in the face of so much societal pressure to have sex.

“I learned how to stay away from a bad situation.”  
— 14-year-old boy



# Keeping It Going Throughout the Teen Years

**“I don’t have to do what I don’t want to... there are people out there who wait.”**

**— 15-year-old girl**

## The “Hands-On” Family

A 1999 Study by Columbia University’s Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse coined the term “hands-on parenting.” According to the study, children with “hands-on” parents were statistically far less likely to smoke, use drugs, do badly in school or be involved in a teen pregnancy. The study’s authors emphasized that teens needed “parents, not pals,” and that parents should expect to monitor teens: their whereabouts, their CD purchases, their Internet use, their studies, their friends, and their activities.

Successful parents and teens do things together. Some of them are pretty basic. For example, families that eat dinner together four or more times a week can expect their children to be happier and better-adjusted throughout the difficult teen years.

Arguably, a commitment to sexual abstinence will require more of this “hands-on” parenting, and more togetherness, than almost any other decision a teen will make.

So what can you do?

- ➔ Find something to share. It could be a sport, either as a participant or a fan. It could be swing dancing. It could be a shared book after dinner, shopping at a mall, fishing, or music.
- ➔ Expect some trouble, and prepare for it. Many teens hit a tough rebellious phase early in the teen years. It might last two months, or it might go on longer. Stick with your loving authority, and stick with your principles. Once you get through the tough patch, your teen will be grateful, and you will be in new and more loving territory.

➔ Set up a regular routine of accountability. For teens, having the same-gender parent check in weekly to talk things over can help. If that is not possible or appropriate, consider arranging to have your teen talk regularly with a mentor or counselor—someone you know well and can trust. Maybe that would be an adult relative, a coach, a clergy member, or a psychologist. Be prepared. Teens can start to resent this “checking in” as a nuisance. And it can be. So try to keep it casual, even fun. Just don’t neglect it. Your teen will think twice about doing something if they know you’re going to ask about it.

### Peer Group Support

Your children talk with the accent of their peers. They wear the clothing of their peers. They grow up with the same movies, TV shows, video games, books and schools.

You can enlist the support of other families and fellow teens in reinforcing abstinence, too.

**Teens Talk:** “I had chosen to wait a long time ago, but I always felt that I was the only one. It was so encouraging to see all the people there and to know that I really wasn’t the only one after all.”



Help your teen to find other teens who have made this decision. If you can’t find them locally, try the Web. For example, several of the websites listed in the resource section of this guide are designed for teens or have special sections for teens.

**“Even if you are sexually active, you can stop and wait until you are married.”**

— 18-year-old girl

Find a buddy family you can work with in this commitment. It might be a family you already know. Or you may make friends with a family you'll get to know through your teen. If you can form this kind of bond, keep it up. Get together on a regular basis, whether it's for a formal discussion or a barbecue. It counts a lot when a kid knows there's somebody on his or her side.

**Teens Talk:** "We got talking about the subject. The two boys that I least expected to do anything like this had promised to each other to 'keep the snake in the cage' until they were old enough. When I asked how old 'old enough' was, they said until they were married."

In addition, whether you're religious or not, you may be able to find an abstinence support group meeting at a local church, mosque or temple. You may be able to start such a group yourself. Most places of worship would gladly loan or rent a room for this type of meeting.

This kind of support group can be organized in various ways. You can create one group, for example, just for parents. Another could be for teens only—this one will probably need some kind of adult facilitator. Another could be for parents and teens together.

We hope we've given you some information and encouragement about how to talk to your teen about the important issue of sexuality.

We firmly believe in your role as a parent to be the primary educator of your teen.

"I learned  
that saying 'No'  
is okay and  
there are many  
ways to do it."

— 17-year-old girl



# Resources on Abstinence and Teen Sexuality

## ORGANIZATIONS

### The Medical Institute for Sexual Health

(800) 892-9484

[www.medinstitute.org](http://www.medinstitute.org)

Premiere medically based resource for information about and solutions to problems associated with sexually transmitted disease and non-marital pregnancy.

### National Abstinence Clearinghouse

(888) 577-2966

<http://www.abstinence.net/>

Non-profit educational organization with an online resource library, news updates and an online abstinence resource store.

### Silver Ring Thing

(888) 741-5673

[www.silverringthing.com](http://www.silverringthing.com)

Faith-based organization that produces high-tech events using sketch comedy and music videos to educate teens about abstinence. Teens attending the event receive a ring to wear as a constant reminder of their abstinence pledge.

### U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Population Affairs

(866) 640-PUBS (7827)

<http://opa.osophs.dhhs.gov/pubs/publications.html>

Brochures published by the federal government on adolescent sexuality. Can be viewed online or ordered free of charge. See especially:

- If You Think Saying “No” Is Tough, Just Wait ‘Til You Say “Yes”;
- You Didn’t Get Pregnant. You Didn’t Get AIDS. So Why Do You Feel Bad?; and
- How To Be A Better Lover.

“Having sex can give you diseases, a baby, or heart-break. Abstinence is the best choice.”

— 14-year-old girl



## Focus on the Family

(800) A-FAMILY (232-6459)

[www.family.org](http://www.family.org)

Faith-based organization dedicated to preserving traditional values and the institution of the family. Search resource section for the following relevant publications:

- Take Twelve: The truth behind 12 of the most common arguments made by powerful “safe-sex” organizations against the abstinence-until-marriage message;
- Let’s Talk About Sex; and
- Five Reasons You Need “The Piece of Paper.”

## Kaiser Family Foundation

<http://www.kff.org>

Serves as an independent voice and source of facts and analysis on major health care issues in the U.S. by conducting nationally representative surveys. To find relevant information, choose “Adolescent Sexual Health” from the “Browse by Topic” dropdown bar.



## INTERNET RESOURCES

Websites for teens on making healthy sexual choices. Many also contain sections for parents, teachers and health care professionals.

[www.abstinencedu.org](http://www.abstinencedu.org)

[www.choosetoday.org](http://www.choosetoday.org)

[www.doinitright.org](http://www.doinitright.org)

[www.freeteens.org](http://www.freeteens.org)

[www.sexcanwait.com](http://www.sexcanwait.com)

[www.worththewait.org](http://www.worththewait.org)

## BOOKS

Cook, Bruce. *Parents, Teens and SEX: The BIG TALK Book*. Choosing the Best Publishing, 2003.  
800-774-2378  
www.choosingthebest.org

Meeker, M.D., Meg. *Epidemic: How Teen Sex is Killing our Kids*. National Book Network, 2002.

## PUBLISHED ARTICLES

“Choosing Virginity.” *Newsweek*, Dec. 9, 2002.

Ingrassia, Michelle, “Virgin Cool.” *Newsweek*, Oct. 17, 1994, pp. 59-69.

“Like, a Virgin: Teen Abstinence Movement is Winning New Converts—Till Sex Do Them Part.” *The Boston Globe*, Living Arts (D), Feb. 13, 2001.

Morse, Jodie, “An Rx for Teen Sex.” *Time*, Sept. 29, 2002.

“Teens & Sex.” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 27, 2002.



“Sex is great  
but it has  
consequences.”

— 14-year-old girl

