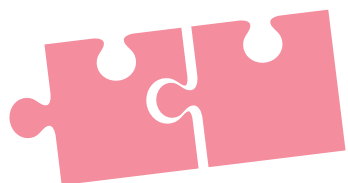
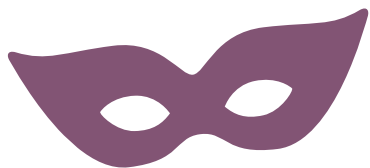


THE RATIONAL ENQUIRER 2015



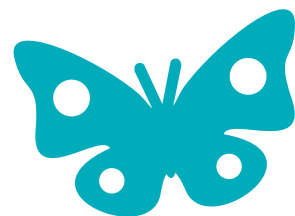
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IDENTITY



LOVE



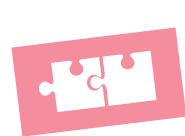
LIFE

FREE!

"The Rational Enquirer" includes articles on youth sexual health. Many stories reflect youths' perspective. Sexual health is more than just sex; it includes your physical, emotional, mental and social well-being (World Health Organization, 2006). As you read through the 20th edition of "The Rational Enquirer," take the time to explore your own thoughts, feelings and knowledge on what sex, identity, love and life mean to you. We hope that the articles can be a point of meaningful conversations with parents, partners and friends. Have questions or want more information? Please be sure to check out the resources page.

"The Rational Enquirer" is an annual publication. We would like to hear your voice for next year's edition. If you would like to submit an article, please email lindsay.weaver@state.or.us for more information.

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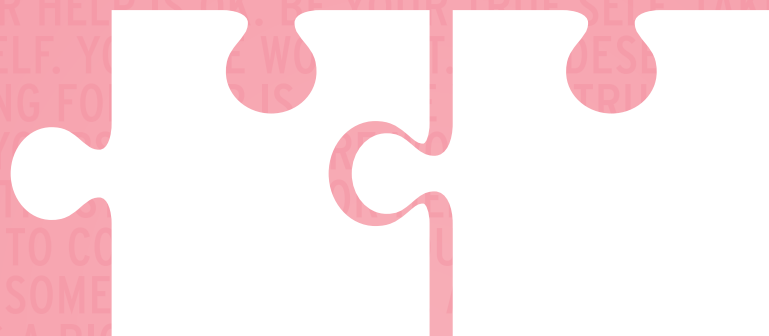
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SEX

EVERYONE HAS A RIGHT TO CONSENT.



PEER PRESSURE


There is a lot of pressure to have sex in high school. When you are a boy about 14 or 15 years old, there is a lot of pressure to lose your virginity. When I was 15, I was at a campfire with my friends and one of my buddies said, "We're gonna get you laid tonight, buddy." I was all for it, of course. But one thing he said that I still remember was, "It doesn't matter who she is or what she looks like. Just get it done as fast as you can." This was kind of funny to hear because most of the people I talk to say that it needs to be special and wait for the right one. Now that I have learned about sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS, I am sure glad I have waited and didn't do something I regret the rest of my life.

Author is an Oregon high school student.



EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTIVES AND YOU

by Alison Babich



Do you ever worry about an unplanned pregnancy? How it would affect your life? How it would change your future? Choosing not to have sex is the sure way to avoid pregnancy and to reduce the risk of STDs, including HIV. However, if you choose to have sex, you can lower your chances of an unplanned pregnancy by using birth control. But what if you forgot to take your birth control? Or the condom breaks? Or you weren't planning on having sex, but it happened anyway? That's when emergency contraception (EC) can save the day.

Emergency contraception, or EC, is a pill or device that prevents pregnancy after sex. It works by stopping the egg from being released from the ovary so it can't get fertilized. It does not work if you are already pregnant (and it doesn't hurt the fetus), and does not lower your chances of getting pregnant in the future.

A lot of confusion has surrounded EC over the years. Do you need a prescription? Not for all EC products. Is it available over the counter? Some are.

Here's the
lowdown:

EC available over-the-counter (OTC)

These emergency contraceptives are available for anyone. That means you don't have to be a certain age, you don't need a prescription, and both males and females can buy them.

Plan B One-Step®

Take Action™

Next Choice One-Dose™

My Way™

AfterPill™

Only available online,
which means you cannot
buy it last-minute.

**Other generic one-pill
LNG EC products**

Other ECs

These emergency contraceptives have a few restrictions.

Generic two-pill levonorgestrel EC products

Anyone 16 and younger must have a prescription; those 17 and older do not need one.

ella®

Women of all ages need a prescription.

Copper® IUD

It needs to be inserted by a health care provider.

Unfortunately, like everything in life, there are some considerations:

- All EC products work better the sooner they are taken after unprotected sex. They tend to work less and less well the longer you wait; and if you wait longer than five days, they will not work at all.
- Some EC products lose their effectiveness the heavier you are:
 - Plan B One-Step® and other generic one-pill brands don't work as well for anyone over 154 pounds.
 - ella® doesn't work as well for anyone over 193 pounds.
 - Copper® IUD works best for anyone, no matter what your weight.
- The law surrounding EC products is always changing. Be sure to check www.Not-2-late.org for the most current information.

So where can you get EC?

- You can get EC from health care providers and family planning clinics.
- Most pharmacies carry Plan B One-Step®, generic brands and/or ella®.
- Sexual assault victims can get EC from hospital emergency rooms.
- You can find information on free or low-cost EC and birth control near you by calling 2-1-1.

Where can you find more information on EC?

- You can download and print this easy-to-read fact sheet on EC: <http://bit.ly/oregonecbrochure>

Alison Babich is from the Oregon Reproductive Health Program. Go to www.healthoregon.org/rh.





CONDOM FACTS

- Condoms are easy to get.
- Condoms are like very thin, very strong gloves, worn over the penis to catch semen.
- A condom is used by unrolling it over an erect penis.
- The tip of the condom should be squeezed to push out any air, so there is room for semen when the person with a penis ejaculates.
- Some people use lubricant (watery, slippery gel) on the outside and inside of the condom to make it feel better during sex.
- To keep the condom from slipping off and spilling semen, one of the partners must hold the condom at the base of the penis when pulling it out of the body.
- The condom is used only once and then thrown away.
- When used correctly, condoms are very good at preventing STDs, HIV and pregnancy.
- Using a condom together with another birth control method gives even more protection against pregnancy, in case the condom breaks.
- Condoms come in vinyl or polyurethane if a person has a latex allergy.
- There is no age requirement to buy condoms.

Adapted from Seattle and King County Public Health Family Life and Sexual Health (FLASH) curricula. Reprinted with permission.

CHOOSING NOT TO HAVE SEX — ABSTINENCE

- Abstinence is choosing not to have oral, anal or vaginal sex.
Oral sex is when one person's mouth goes on another person's genitals, anal sex is when a penis goes in someone's anus (butt), and vaginal sex is when a penis goes in someone's vagina.
- Abstaining from sex is the only certain way to avoid pregnancy and to reduce the risk of STDs, including HIV.

MORE INFORMATION

- There are times in everyone's life when abstaining from sex is the healthiest choice.
- People of every sexual orientation choose abstinence — gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight.
- Choosing to abstain from sex to prevent pregnancy and STDs including HIV has no financial cost.
- People can choose to not have sex at any point in their lives, even if they have had sex in the past.
- When people decide to not have sex, it may be a temporary or longer-term decision.

- There are many reasons people might choose to not have sex. Here are just a few reasons. You can also come up with some of your own:
 - Personal or religious beliefs and values;
 - Haven't found the "right" partner;
 - Not in love;
 - Avoid pregnancy, STDs and HIV;
 - Don't want to jeopardize future goals;
 - Not ready;
 - Focusing on something else right now — school, sports, friends;
 - Want to build relationships based on things other than sex.

STRATEGIES TO HELP A PERSON BE ABSTINENT

- It is important for people to talk with their partner about whether or not they want to have sex before they are in a sexual situation. It is never too late to talk about it.
- It is helpful for people to know for themselves the important reasons they are choosing abstinence.
- Avoiding drugs and alcohol makes it easier to be abstinent.
- It is helpful to have friends who support the decision to abstain from sex.
- It is helpful to avoid situations where sexual activity is more likely, such as being home alone with a boyfriend or girlfriend.





Under lock and key

by Jacob Rice

Many people believe that high school teenagers should not be engaged in sex.

Many stores keep birth control under lock and key. That is the worst thing that they could do.

No matter what you do, teenagers will be having sex. Putting birth control under lock and key is not going to lower teen pregnancy rates. If anything, it will raise them. Without condoms or birth control pills, kids are forced to "pull and pray." Guess what? It rarely works.

With condoms under lock and key, teens will be at higher risk for pregnancy as well as for STDs. So, what's the solution? Don't put them under lock and key. Sex is a healthy part of a relationship. So if teens are going to do it, allow them to do it safely. Let teens buy condoms if they need them. And when they ask for condoms, don't look down on them. You should be happy because they want to be safe.

I'm not saying that it is good for kids to have sex. I'm not saying it is bad either. All I am trying to say is that kids should be encouraged to have safe sex. Buying a 12-pack of condoms is a lot cheaper than buying a baby crib, baby clothes, strollers, bottles and diapers. If you can prevent it, why not? Allow kids to be safe. That is all I am asking.



Jacob Rice, 17, is a student at North Eugene High School. He is close to earning his Eagle rank as a Boy Scout and volunteers with his county's search and rescue team. You can find him outdoors in his free time — camping, hiking and biking with his friends.

BE YOUR TRUE SELF.



IDENTITY



Traditional perspectives

on being gay, lesbian, bisexual, two-spirit or transgender

For the most part, our modern mainstream society divides gender into two domains – man and woman, or boy and girl. Many traditional cultures around the world, including many Native American cultures, have not always viewed things in this way. A person who was born of the male sex was not automatically seen as a boy and a person born as a female was not automatically viewed as a girl.

Genders were based on societal and cultural roles, and often there were more than just two. A person might be identified as a man, a woman or another gender blending both men's and women's roles. Sometimes gender was not assigned until more was known about the child's personality. At that time, the child may be identified as belonging to any one of the possible genders recognized in their culture.



In a similar way, intimate relationships were not always limited to men and women. In other words, sex and relationships were not always limited by assigned gender. This way of seeing the world allowed people to be true to their nature as well as benefiting the tribe or culture.

Other-gendered people often had special roles that were just for them. Instead of people being shunned for their differences, the differences were appreciated and each individual had a place in society and a way to contribute. They often had specific names for their assigned gender roles. They were revered leaders, medicine people and tribal representatives in negotiations. They also conducted specific ceremonial roles. If you are interested in your tribe's or culture's perspective, you might ask an elder, a trusted adult or someone from your tribe or community who identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual or two-spirit. There are also many books published on this topic. For references to available books visit www.weRnative.org.

Adapted with permission from We R Native (www.weRnative.org).



BOXED IN BY GENDER

by Tsering Bista



Like many little girls, I wanted to be a ballerina —

the epitome of grace, beauty and femininity. As a child, I'd flip through sparkly picture books, play with Barbie dolls and stare at TV screens as dancers pirouetted across the stage; all of those things only reinforced my love for tiaras and tulle. From there, my childhood affinity for all-things pink and flowery grew. Everything just seemed so right and perfectly girly. I always preferred wearing dresses to wearing pants. I mean, it was the norm. I was enjoying doing what was expected of me as a girl.



But now that I think about it, I wonder what it would have been like if I aimed to be a football player or racecar driver instead. As I've gotten older, I've started to ask more questions about gender. Why was I always expected to help my mom cook dinner while my brothers got to help my dad build things outside? Why do my best friends cake their faces with makeup to impress their crushes? Why do the guys in my school never admit to their feelings? Why is it such a problem if someone doesn't want to identify as male or female?

These questions relate directly to expectations everyone faces. We will always be expected to fit into societal or familial molds about gender. This starts very early, when the nursery is painted baby blue or peachy pink, when the birth certificate reads "John" or "Abby," when the first toy gifted to a child is a toy car or a doll. These expectations for who we should be as a girl or a guy can be complex, affecting how we express our emotions, how we dress and how we make decisions about sex.

Everyone should feel like how they express their gender, even when it doesn't match their sex, is acceptable.



Girls will be girls

There are lots of expectations for girls, especially when it comes to how we dress. When friends or family members decide a girl isn't dressing "appropriately" and tell her about it, a girl can feel bad about herself and how she chooses to express herself. Such is the case for Melisa, 17, from Oakland, California, who is often slut-shamed by other girls for wearing short skirts.

"Yeah, some girls like to call me mean things because they think I'm being too promiscuous or whatever. It makes me feel like an outcast and, sometimes, like I'm being looked down on," she explains.

Sixteen-year-old Alex from Newton, Massachusetts, knows what Melisa is going through, only it's her family that lays out the expectations for how she should dress as a girl.

Alex says,

My parents are Indian and fairly conservative compared to my friends' parents. This means that I can't just go out shopping and buy whatever looks nice to me. I need





to think about what would be culturally appropriate and acceptable to my parents and relatives when they see photos of me on Facebook. I do believe, however, that it is a woman's choice how she chooses to dress or express herself. In India, many people think that men rape women because they are asking for it by dressing provocatively or being out at night. To me this is unjust and a pitiful attempt at justifying a horrendous and inhuman act.

Melisa's and Alex's experiences are examples of gender policing — when someone is encouraged or forced to meet gender expectations in terms of appearance or behavior.

Girls all around the world are expected to maintain a certain type of appearance — to look “proper” and “respectable.” At the same time, some of them are taught to aim for perfection through beauty. For example, Barbie has been a role model and a female standard for decades — a blonde bombshell with a lean figure, clad in heels and a skintight dress. So do girls strive for the “appropriate” look or the beautified one? Expectations for girls are often contradictory. They can be torn between being modest in order to be respected (which, like Alex's situation, is often related to family and peer pressure) and being super sexy in order to be valued by men, an idea perpetuated by advertisements and movies.

Boys will be boys

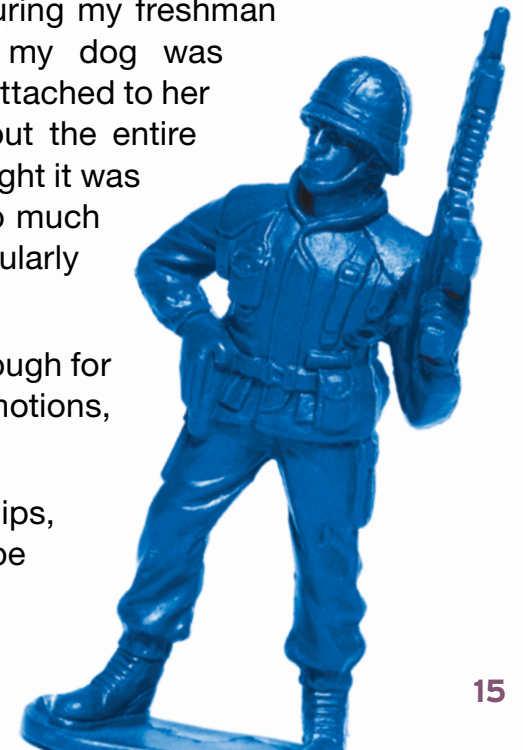
Boys are expected to be muscular and physically fit. This is part of a “tough guy” archetype, which also requires guys to only express certain emotions, like anger. Crying is seen as a sign of weakness and a lack of masculinity. Seventeen-year-old Neel from Shelton, Connecticut, knows exactly what it feels like to be judged for behaving in a way that doesn't meet the “tough guy” expectations set up for guys.

He says,

I will never forget one time during my freshman year of high school when my dog was undergoing surgery. I was so attached to her and was concerned throughout the entire school day. Some people thought it was unusual for a male to show so much concern for an animal, particularly a small female pug ...

Guys get judged as not manly enough for having and expressing human emotions, like sadness or kindness.

And when it comes to relationships, Neel says guys are “expected to be ready to pounce on females and become dominant.”





Sarah, 16, from New York City, says, “Guys are expected to make the first move, carry condoms and be the ones who always want to have sex. Girls are never expected to do any of that.”

What Sarah describes is definitely true of expectations for guys in the U.S. The sad thing is that a guy who doesn’t want to make the first move, who isn’t only interested in sex or who isn’t heterosexual can be expected to chase girls and can be bullied in subtle or violent ways when he doesn’t.

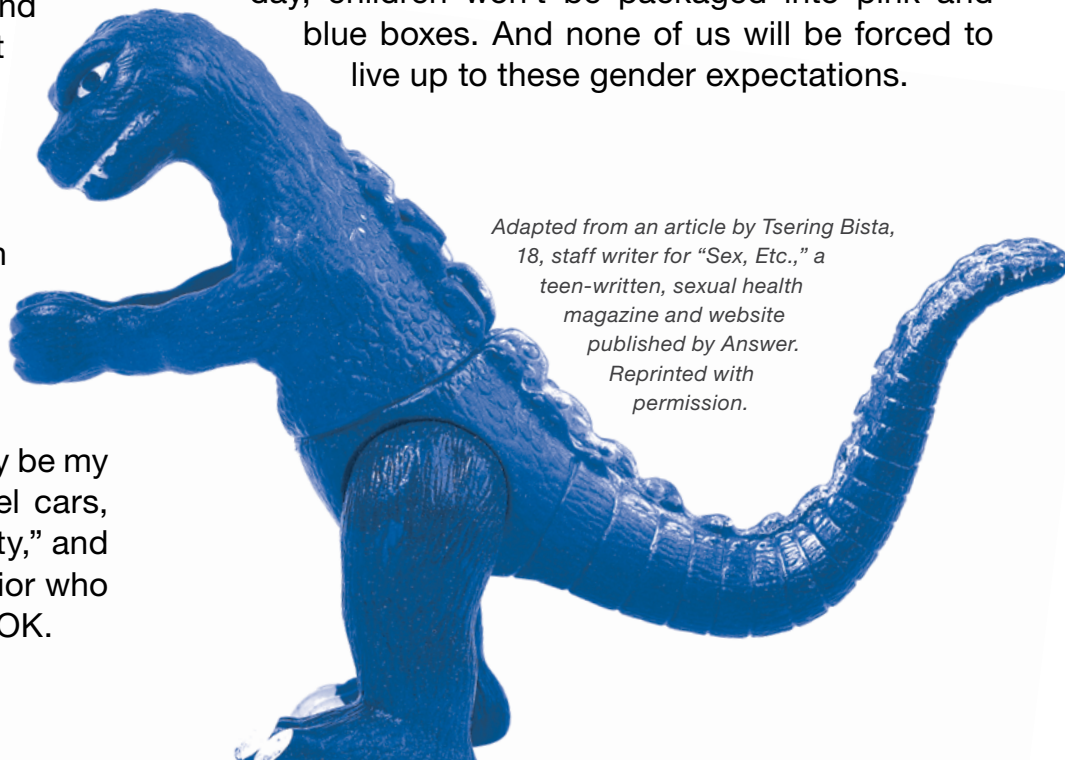
David, 16, from Jersey City, New Jersey, says,

In fourth grade, someone called me a girl, and I cried in my bathroom at home ... I’m not the conventional guy; beer is disgusting, guys are hot and I openly display my crazy wrecked emotions. But this doesn’t matter; it shouldn’t make me less of a man. I’ve been beaten over the head with this stupid belief that boys should like blue, and boys should marry girls, and boys should be friends with mostly boys. But you know what? Blue may be my color and I may love Ferrari model cars, but dammit, I love “Sex and the City,” and I think I’m falling in love with a junior who has a penis. And that should be OK.



Challenging expectations of gender

No one should have to feel like who they truly are and how they express being a guy or girl is unacceptable. No one should have to feel like how they express their gender, even when it doesn’t match their sex, is unacceptable. We shouldn’t have to feel like we’ll only be accepted if we fit neatly into a gender box. Everyone should be able to dress and behave in whatever manner they please, regardless of their sex or gender identity. Hopefully, one day, children won’t be packaged into pink and blue boxes. And none of us will be forced to live up to these gender expectations.



Adapted from an article by Tsering Bista, 18, staff writer for “Sex, Etc.,” a teen-written, sexual health magazine and website published by Answer. Reprinted with permission.



LOVE



THE RELATIONSHIP SPECTRUM

What is a healthy relationship?

HEALTHY	Communicating You talk openly about problems without shouting or yelling. You listen, hear, respect and compromise with each other.	Respectful You value each other's culture, beliefs, opinions and boundaries. Your actions show you hold each other in high esteem.	Trusting You both trust each other, and the trust has been earned.
UNHEALTHY	Not communicating Problems are seldom or never discussed. You don't listen to each other or try to compromise.	Disrespectful One or both partners are inconsiderate toward the other and do not show they care.	Not trusting You suspect your partner is doing things behind your back, or your partner is suspicious of your loyalty without reason.
ABUSIVE	Communicates abusively You and/or your partner scream, cuss, threaten, demean or insult the other.	Disrespectful through abuse You and/or your partner intentionally and continuously disregard feelings and physical safety of the other.	Falsely accuses the other A partner suspects and accuses, without reason, the other of flirting or cheating. This often leads to physical or verbal harm.



Honest

You are both honest with each other but can still choose to keep certain things private.

Equal

You make decisions together and you hold each other to the same standards.

Enjoy personal space

You both enjoy spending time apart and respect when one of you voices a need for space.

Consensual sexual decisions

You both consent to sexual activity and can talk about what is OK and what isn't. If you're having sex, you decide together how to address pregnancy and STD prevention.

Dishonest

One or both partners are telling lies to each other.

Trying to take control

One or both partners see their desires or decisions as more important and are focused on getting their own way.

Feeling smothered and not spending time with others

One partner feels uncomfortable spending so much time together. Or you and/or your partner ignores friends, family or things that used to be important to you.

Pressuring sexual activity or ignoring consequences

One partner tries to convince the other of sexual activity. Or both partners are consensually sexually active but are not addressing possible consequences.

Doesn't take responsibility for abuse

The violent or verbally abusive partner denies or minimizes their actions or blames the other for them.

Controls the other partner

There is no equality in the relationship. What one partner says goes. Trying to change this can increase abuse.

Isolates the other partner

One partner controls where the other one goes and who the other partner sees and talks to. The other partner has no personal space and is often totally isolated.

Forces sexual activity

One partner determines the how, when and where of sexual activity. Threats and violence are used prior to or during sexual activity.



What are your relationship goals?

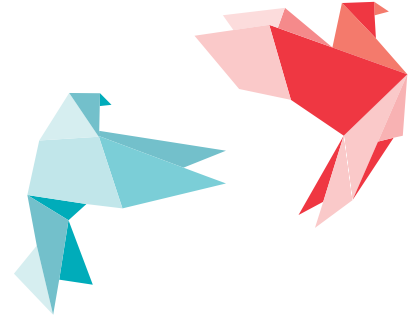
by Celeste Brandt

In high school, you're probably seeing young couples every day. You may even be in a relationship yourself. You may be wondering if you are going to be one of those couples who last all the way to marriage from high school.

I am in a high school relationship. My boyfriend and I have been together for about a year and a half now, and we began dating in the summer before freshman year. Almost everyone in his family have been together (and gotten married) since they were about 14 years old. When I first found this out, I was flabbergasted. Would I be expected to have a lifetime relationship with my boyfriend like they did?

I was scared in the beginning when I met his family, and then I realized that I had found someone that I was obviously compatible with, and if we love each other, there is no reason not to try for marriage someday. At least I would know that I really know the person I am marrying. Now when his mother is talking to people and refers to me as her daughter-in-law, I get butterflies.

It is OK to have the goal of marriage or commitment in the back of your mind when you're in a relationship. You don't have to be ready for marriage right after high school. However, talking with your boyfriend or girlfriend about your relationship and goals for the future is important for building a healthy relationship.



Celeste Brandt, 15, is a North Eugene High School student. She is studying culinary arts and looking for her first job. In her free time, she likes to hang out with her friends and practice driving.

To some of my students

By Eileen McGurn

*This message is the same no matter what the pronouns.
At this time, the majority of my students are young women.*

If he tells you he loves you
And then hits you
He is not capable of love

If he says he loves you and lies to you
Walk away
And keep walking

If he says you're the only one for him
And his phone blows up with calls and texts from others
Do not snoop
Do not retaliate
Do not try to "make him jealous"
Walk away

If he says he loves you
But punches holes in the walls and doors
It's better than punching you or your child
But it's not good enough
Walk away

If he looks for a job
By playing Xbox
Decide if you're willing to support him and your child
If you are, OK
If not ...

There are other good men out there
But you will not be able to see them
Until you understand yourselves
Who you are
Where you have come from
What you have seen
How to change
Do the work
Stop the cycle

It is difficult and scary to be a single parent
But remember, your daughters are watching
They will choose as you have chosen
Unless you do the work
Remember, your sons are watching
They need to be protected from the need to protect you

If you can stand on your own feet
Support yourselves, support your children
You will stand tall and strong
You will be your children's hero and protector
Just as a mother should be

Eileen McGurn is, among other things, a teacher and a poet. She has spent the last 10 years of her teaching career at The PACE Program for pregnant and parenting students in the North Clackamas School District. There, she teaches language arts, social studies, creative writing and anything else that needs teaching (except math) to the most wonderful students in the world.





How can we communicate better?

Part of being in a healthy relationship is having good communication. Use the guidelines below to open up the channels of communication between you and your partner. If you're in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, be careful using these tips. You know your relationship best. If any of these tips would put you in danger, don't try them.

For healthier communication, try to:

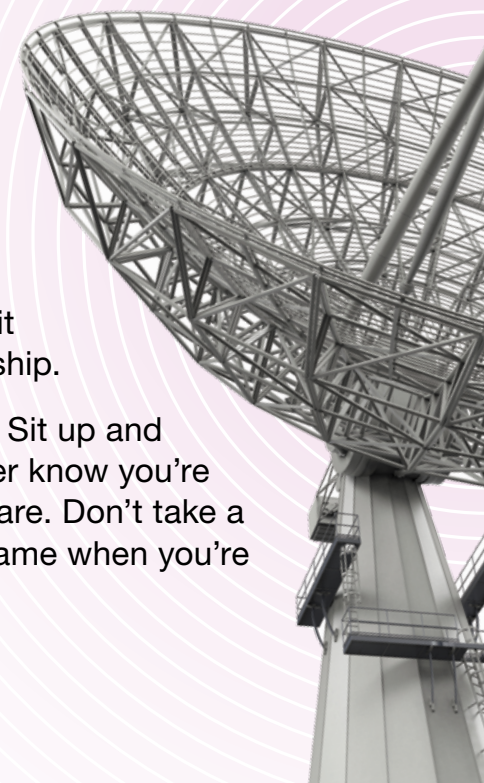
Find the right time. If something is bothering you and you would like to have a serious conversation about it, make sure you pick the right time to talk. Don't interrupt your partner when they're doing something else like watching TV or studying for a test. Tell your partner you would like to talk later and find a time when you're in the same room and not doing anything important.

Talk face to face. Avoid talking about serious matters or issues in writing. Text messages, letters and emails can be misinterpreted. Talk in person to avoid miscommunication.

Do not attack. Even when we mean well, we can sometimes come across as harsh because of our word choice. Using "you" can sound like you're attacking, which will make your partner defensive and less receptive to your message. Instead, try using "I" or "we." For example, say "I feel like we haven't been as close lately" instead of "You have been distant with me."

Be honest. Agree to be honest. Sometimes the truth hurts, but it's the key to a healthy relationship. Admit that you aren't always perfect and apologize when you make a mistake instead of making excuses. You will feel better and it will help strengthen your relationship.

Check your body language. Sit up and face your partner. Let your partner know you're listening. Show them you really care. Don't take a phone call, text or play a video game when you're talking. Listen and respond.





Use the 48-hour rule. If your partner does something that makes you angry, you need to tell them about it. But you don't have to do so right away. If you're still hurt 48 hours later, say something. If not, consider forgetting about it. But remember your partner can't read your mind. If you don't speak up when you're upset, there is no way for them to apologize or change. Once you do mention your hurt feelings and your partner sincerely apologizes, let it go. Don't bring up past issues if they're not relevant.

How to communicate if you are angry

It's OK to get angry in a relationship — everyone does at some point! What's important is that you resolve conflicts in a healthy way. If you get angry with your partner, here are a few steps to take:

Stop. If you get really angry about something, stop, take a step back and breathe. Give yourself time to calm down by watching TV, talking to a friend, playing a video

game, taking a walk, listening to some music or whatever helps you relax. Taking a break can keep the situation from getting worse.

Think. After you're no longer upset, think about the situation and why you got so angry. Was it how your partner spoke or something they did? Figure out the real problem and then think about how to explain your feelings.

Talk. Finally, talk to your partner and when you do, follow the tips above.

Listen. After you tell your partner how you feel, remember to stop talking and listen to what they have to say. You both deserve the opportunity to express how you feel in a safe and healthy environment.

Communicating isn't always easy. At first, some of these tips may feel unnatural or awkward, but they will help you communicate better and build a healthy relationship.

Adapted with permission from loveisrespect.org. Loveisrespect is a project of the National Domestic Violence Hotline and Break the Cycle.

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LIFE



Q What's it like to get an STD test? — Ally

Hi, Ally. Getting tested for STDs is really easy.

Depending on your situation, your tests might include a physical exam by a doctor or nurse, a urine sample (where you pee in a cup), a blood test, or a swab of your mouth and genitals (to collect samples of fluid, discharge or tissue cells). These tests might be a little uncomfortable, but none of them should hurt.

During your visit ask the doctor or nurse what you are being tested for, as well as any questions you have. Some people bring a notepad or write notes on their phones. That helps them remember the things they want to talk about with their provider and take notes during the visit. And, finally, don't forget to follow up later if you are not contacted about your test results.

To learn more about testing site locations close to you, visit the GYT: *Get Yourself Tested* at www.itsyoursexlife.com/stds-testing-gyt. All you need to do is enter in your ZIP code and a list of testing centers in your area will appear. Awesome.

Also, if you want to read more info on STD testing before your visit, check out www.plannedparenthood.org.

I'm glad you wrote in Ally!

Love, Auntie

Adapted with permission from "We R Native." You can read other questions and answers and submit your own question to "Ask Auntie" at www.weRnative.org.



MTV's "16 and Pregnant" Is this reality?

by Macy Guppy

It's a Monday night. My teenage daughter's homework is miraculously done and she has settled in for some TV. There's a look of horror on her face, so I figure she is watching "Vampire Diaries." Her face is curled into a grimace and she keeps repeating, "OMG!" and "You have got to be kidding!" throughout the show.

But this is no fantastical horror show. *My daughter is glued to MTV's "16 and Pregnant."*

Throughout the United States, and the 168 countries MTV reaches, preteen and teenage girls have been tuning into "16 and Pregnant" and its "Teen Mom" spin-offs since 2009. Each year these series explore the lives of four teenage girls as they experience pregnancy, birth and becoming parents. The program shows the girls negotiating the very adult challenges of having a child while still children themselves. The decidedly unromantic portrayal of their lives reveals the consequences of having unprotected sex at an early age, including quitting school, sometimes violent arguments with their own parents and the child's father, and the constant sleep-deprivation and stresses that come from parenting a baby.

These programs were born, and today thrive, in a climate of rapid decline of the United States' teen birth rate. In fact, it's at an all-time low, especially in Oregon, where the drop is even more impressive than the national average. A new study by the National Bureau of Economic Research indicates that these shows may be helping this downward trend. The study's authors say teens watching "16 and Pregnant" see a girl who "has been fighting with her boyfriend on a daily basis. She's gaining weight. Her friends are partying without her." Not fun.

I'm all in favor of TV presenting a tough look at teenage pregnancy and parenthood to my daughter and other preteens and teens. But although "16 and Pregnant" and its spin-offs appear to de-glorify the girls' lives, they also glorify the girls themselves — making them into temporary celebrities. It's hard to pass the grocery store tabloids without seeing a screaming headline or photograph on the cover about one of the teen moms, such as "Maci's back with her baby daddy!" or "Exclusive photos from Catelynn and Tyler's tearful reunion with baby Carly!" Reality TV encourages the celebration of celebrity that has exploded in our culture. The girls in these series were chosen for their extreme personalities and drama-filled lives, which fuel high ratings and generate advertising dollars.

So how do we take in these media products with a critical eye?

Like most things, it's complicated.

Using a critical lens

What are "16 and Pregnant" and "Teen Mom" really teaching?

All of us — teens and adults alike — need tools to critically evaluate all types of media messages so we can understand their impact on our society and ourselves.





Some key media literacy questions

- 1 **Who is conveying this message and what incentive might they have to convey information from this perspective?**
- 2 **What language and media (e.g., text, audio, video, graphics) are they using to describe this message?**
- 3 **What audience is this message crafted for?**
- 4 **How is the media and language displayed tapping in to commonly held stereotypes or representations?**

(Questions adapted from University of Minnesota, "Integrating Media Literacy Concepts and Skills into Teaching," www.lib.umn.edu/media/teachingmedialiteracy)

Breaking down the questions:

- 1 **MTV conveys the message**, which the series creator, Lauren Dolgen, says is to educate girls about the perils of pregnancy and young parenthood. Though this may be a noble public service goal, we can never forget the key question in every corporate media programming decision: What will pull in an audience and generate revenue?

MTV's global corporate parent, Viacom, made \$13.8 billion in revenue in 2013. Although MTV has recently been struggling to reinvent itself for the changing youth market, shows such as "Teen Wolf," "Teen Mom 2" and "Catfish" have performed well in ratings. "Teen Mom 2" consistently won the most 18-24-year-old viewers on the night it aired.

- 2 **These series come to us through the dubious reality of reality TV.** Although this programming appears natural, a carefully crafted construction makes it hard to pick out what you are seeing from "reality." Most reality shows refer to their recruitment process as "casting" and their programs as "storylines." Reality show producers commonly ask the show's "talent" (i.e., the shows' main characters) to re-do scenes in order to create more compelling storylines.

Does that sound like reality, or do the shows have more in common with production techniques used in scripted TV sitcoms and dramas?

3 **Television can serve as a “super peer”**

to preteens and teens, according communications professor Debra Merskin, an expert on media and girls. It is natural and normal for teens to talk to one another, rather than adults — especially for information they consider embarrassing or fear they will be judged for asking. In this way, media can become a very powerful educator — a super peer.

But at what price?

In her book “Sexing the Media,” Merskin writes:

... the mass media are among the leading sources of sex education in the country. While parents and peers are important, they are not the most influential ... Teens rank the media second only to school sex education programs as a leading source of information about sex. Scholars point out that, long before many parents begin to discuss sex with their children, answers to such questions as “When is it OK to have sex?” ... are provided by messages delivered on television.



Merskin cites four reasons why media play such a huge role in sexual socialization:

- **The content is pervasive and ubiquitous.** Sitcoms, dramas, entertainment magazines, films and music all provide information on sex.
- **The content is highly accessible and widely consumed.** Children typically spend more time watching TV than they spend in school or engaging with their parents.
- **The media are often forthcoming and explicit about sexuality when others are not.** In general, the media present sex without complications or consequences, focusing on passions and pleasures.
- Because the whole purpose of media is to attract readers and viewers, **the content is presented in ways that are exciting, enticing, colorful and compelling.**

“16 and Pregnant” and the “Teen Mom” series are excellent examples of most of these points. However, the shows may actually resist the criteria of presenting sex without complications; they show at least some of the consequences of sex rather than concentrating on its erotic nature.





4 The shows hold up some of the most traditional stereotypes about gender,

especially in relation to young women. For example, most episodes feature the relationship between the girl and the father of her child. The young men are often portrayed as deadbeat dads and the girls as sole caregivers. The teen dads are usually present — at least initially — in the show. However, the series pays little to no attention to what the dads' lives were like before and what they had to give up to become parents.

The shows depict teen pregnancy as a largely white issue, but teen pregnancy statistics negate that image. The girls on the show are fairly representative of the general U.S. teen population, but they do not represent new teen mothers' racial and ethnic profile (66 percent of the moms on the shows are white and non-Hispanic, whereas 39 percent of U.S. teen moms fit this demographic). Three of the young women in the first two series were involved in interracial relationships, but the show does not discuss racial prejudice or racism's effect on the children.

Finally, most teen moms have to depend on the social welfare system and/or their families to make it through pregnancy and teen parenthood. The shows seldom discuss the impact of that contribution.

I encouraged my daughter to watch “16 and Pregnant” and its spin-offs when she was a teenager. While viewing, we talked a lot about how TV and the media construct reality and other issues that influenced what she was viewing. She says, “On camera, the girls' lives seem realistic because they aren't allowed to use the money from the show during filming. In that way, the show does de-glorify the girls' lives. But in other ways, they are not typical.”

So please don't shy away from MTV's “Teen Mom” programs. The shows' value lies in the vivid contrast between the lives of girls who are young parents and their romanticized notions of love, marriage and the baby carriage. But put on that critical lens while you watch. It will help you negotiate media on your own terms. Talk with parents or a trusted adult about these important issues.

Thanks go to Debra Merskin, Ph.D., associate professor of communications at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication, for her guidance and expertise.

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MY PLAN / MI PLAN

Are you committed to taking care of your sexual health? Take a moment and answer these questions for yourself and make a plan.

My commitment: I am committed to taking care of my family, my friends, my community and myself by making wise decisions about my sexual health.

Mi compromiso: Me comprometo a cuidar de mí, mi familia, mis amigos y mi comunidad tomando decisiones juiciosas sobre mi salud sexual.

My long-term goals are ...

Mis metas a largo plazo son ...

I will know I am ready for sexual activity when ...

Sabré que estoy listo(a) para tener relaciones sexuales cuando ...

Something I am proud of about myself is ...

Algo que me enorgullece de mi persona es ...

Things that make it hard to take care of my sexual health ...

Aspectos que hacen difícil que cuide de mi salud sexual ...

Things about me that help me take care of my sexual health ...

Aspectos sobre mí que hacen fácil que cuide de mi salud sexual ...

Three adults I can talk to about sexual health questions I have ...

Tres personas adultas con las que puedo tratar cualquier pregunta de salud sexual que pueda yo tener ...

My Plan/Mi Plan was created in collaboration among ¡Cuidate! Oregon Health Authority Public Health Division program staff and facilitators in Marion, Multnomah, Jackson, Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson counties. ¡Cuidate! is an unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease (STD) and HIV prevention program.





Coping strategies

Coping strategies can help you learn to accept situations that are beyond your control and find ways to help you feel better even if the problem still exists. When you develop coping strategies, you're able to build resilience. You're able to see things in a better perspective and you'll feel much better about how you handled a certain situation. Being able to cope with things makes you a stronger person.

To develop coping strategies, try taking the following actions:

Challenge negative self-talk. Try and focus more on positives about yourself rather than the negatives. The less you bring yourself down, the better you feel about yourself.

Talk to people who can support you. Opening up, whether it's to a best friend, a close family member or a counselor, can be helpful. They may offer a new perspective or just a comforting response to help you through. If you feel uncomfortable talking to someone in person, you can also call a help line anonymously. There is always someone there to listen to you. (For more information, check out <http://us.reachout.com/get-help>).

Relax and breathe. A little relief can go a long way toward helping you reflect on your situation and what you can do for yourself. You may want to try deep breaths, a long walk or sit quietly and take time to notice the things around you.

Distract yourself. Try not to spend all your time and energy thinking about your problem. Keep yourself occupied. Keeping busy can help lift your mood and may even offer opportunities to channel your emotions into positive outlets.

Get involved. Enjoy other activities so that you don't focus exclusively on your problem.

Practice acceptance

When you're faced with a difficult situation, an important question to ask is:

What's the best thing I can do to resolve this problem?

If there's anything you can do, it's important to work through the options one step at a time. But sometimes you might find yourself in a situation that you can't change, no matter how much you would like things to be different.

For example, you can't do much about your height, your age, most of your physical features or the family you were born into. There are also things that have happened in the past that you can't change. What has happened has happened. You can't change the past, but you can still change the way you deal with a situation in the future.

The best way to deal with situations you can't change is to practice acceptance. This means accepting the way things are without insisting that they should be different, and deciding to get on with life in spite of the situation.

Coping strategies and resolutions



Is there a situation that you don't like?

If you can change it, think about problem solving by: defining the problem, brainstorming your goals and lots of possible solutions, evaluating and identifying your best options and then implementing them.

If you cannot change the situation, see how you feel after trying to accept it.

What can you say to yourself to accept the situation? What sorts of things can you do to get on with your life in a positive way, in spite of the problem?

Remember that problems are a normal part of life. We usually feel better when we do something to resolve them rather than just dwell on them. But, if you can't solve the problem, it's helpful to change the way you think about it. Practice acceptance and move on with life in a positive way.

Adapted with permission from Reachout.com:

<http://us.reachout.com/facts/factsheet/developing-coping-strategies>

Reference: "Taking Charge! A Guide for Teenagers: Practical Ways to Overcome Stress, Hassles and Upsetting Emotions" by Sarah Edelman, Ph.D., and Louise Rémond, Foundation for Life Sciences (2005).



Resources

Connect with these resources for assistance, information and referral:

Oregon SafeNet/211info is Oregon's toll-free health and social service helpline. Referrals for most health care needs — including reproductive health services, vaccine information and STD testing — are available. Call 1-800-723-3638 or go to 211info.org.

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline provides resources for teens, parents, friends and family. All communication is confidential and anonymous. Call 1-866-331-9474 or go to www.loveisrespect.org.

National Sexual Assault Hotline provides victims of sexual assault with free, confidential services around the clock. Call 1-800-656-4673 or go to www.rainn.org.

National AIDS/STD Hotline provides information and referral on sexually transmitted infections. Call 1-800-232-4636.

Insights Teen Parenting Program is one of the few nonprofit agencies in the United States devoted exclusively to the needs of young parents. Call 503-239-6996 or go to www.insightstpp.org.

Open Adoption & Family Services offers pregnancy option counseling and open adoption services. Call 1-800-772-1115 or go to www.openadopt.org.

Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Resource Center (SMYRC) creates safety and support for LGBTQ youth in Oregon through youth empowerment, community building, education and direct services. Call 503-872-9664 or go to www.smyrc.org.

Credits

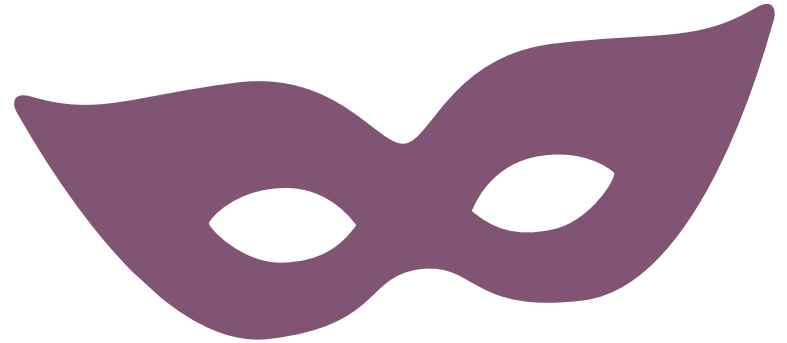
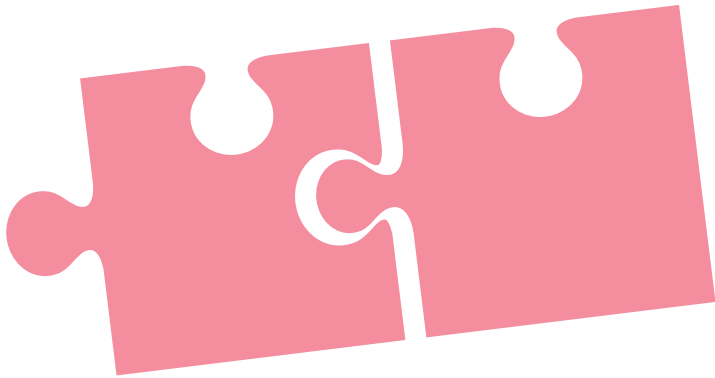
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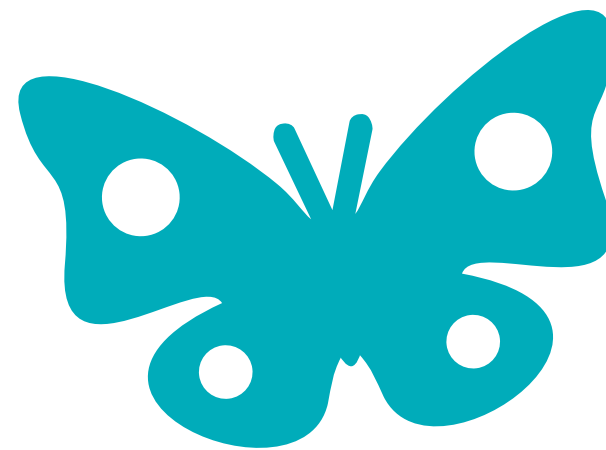
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