



WITH FIONA BAKER



# LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX

Forget the one-off "sex talk" with teens – parents need to be the number one educators on this subject on an almost daily basis

You're sitting around the breakfast table and your 13-year-old casually tells his older sibling that "so-and-so" in the year above – so, 14 years old – had sex the other day. You choke on your coffee. Or you're watching the news as a family and there's a story about a young man on charges for filming a sexual encounter with a colleague without her permission and then showing it to his friends. You cringe and pray they cross to the weather

soon. Then there are those TV and radio ads about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and premature ejaculation. It can seem to parents that sex is everywhere. But rather than suddenly bursting into loud song or flicking the channel every time "it" comes up, mums and dads can use these moments as golden opportunities to engage in casual "sex talks", says Rob Hardy, Family Planning NSW's senior health promotion officer.

"Starting a conversation early with children develops a foundation for ongoing discussions throughout their development and prepares them for independence in adult life," he says. "Parents can take advantage of these 'teachable moments' which pop up in everyday life to talk about a range of sexuality issues. These may include a relationship break-up on a TV soapie or a sexual assault in the news headlines.

"Both examples provide an opportunity to talk about respectful and safe relationships. Parents play an important role in teaching personal values and beliefs around sexuality."

# 1 in 4

### Parents are role models

Research has shown that no matter what teens are talking about with their friends or seeing on the internet and TV, it is parents who are their sexual role models.

A recent University of Montreal survey found 45 per cent of teens look to their parents when it comes to forming their sexual values, compared with 32 per cent who relied on their friends and just 15 per cent who took inspiration from celebrities.

Interestingly, the survey also revealed that many of the teenagers who look to their parents live in families where sexuality is openly discussed, and that these kids have a

A 2008 Australian study found one in four Year 10 students and just over half of all Year 12 students reported having engaged in sexual intercourse. About one in three female students surveyed said they had had "unwanted sex" at some time in their lives.

greater awareness of the risks and consequences of STIs. "Good communication within families, and especially around sexual health, is associated with more responsible behaviours," says researcher Dr Jean-Yves Frappier. Jonathan Nicholas, CEO of the Inspire Foundation, which runs youth support service ReachOut.com, says parents overestimate the role peers and media play in their kids' lives. He believes teens actually want to get their sexual information and guidance from their parents. And they're not just collecting relationship data – on love, respect and romance, as well as sex – in their teens but throughout their childhood. "Kids know that in most cases Mum and Dad are the people who can provide them with the values and information to successfully navigate through love and sex," Nicholas says.

**No need for the sex talk** Both Hardy and Nicholas agree that having a one-off sex talk with teens is a thing of the past. "By that stage it's too late and it can end up being embarrassing for both the parent and child if sexuality issues have never been raised before," Hardy says. "A staged approach is much more practical, so you can keep coming back to the appropriate topics as the child develops. Remember, a conversation is a two-way talk, not a lecture." By the time kids have reached adolescence they know the mechanics of the act, thanks to sex education in schools. "It's the love, intimacy and respect that go with sex that they need information on," Nicholas says. "They need to be assured that sex is an enjoyable and normal part of life when you reach a certain age, and that they're hard-wired to start falling in love and feeling lust at this age. It's the parents' responsibility to ensure they have all this information."



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