

OUR TEENS' SECRET SEX LIVES

leading causes of school dropout. African-American teenagers are also contracting HIV and other STIs at disproportionately high rates. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that among 13-to-24-year-olds, African-Americans account for 55 percent of new HIV cases, while nearly half of all Black girls between 14 and 19 are infected with at least one STI, such as chlamydia, herpes or the human papilloma virus. (The rate is one in five for White girls.) And these statistics say nothing of the psychological trauma—the depression, regret and loss of self-esteem experts say teens may experience as a result of early sexual behavior. In an age when every bad decision can be digitally immortalized, reputations can be ruined before a child even finishes middle school.

Children like Jasmine may shrug off their mothers' advice, but the fact is, parents have the potential for enormous influence. "For the past decade and a half that we've been surveying teens," says Marisa Nightingale, senior adviser at the National Campaign, "they have consistently told us that parents are the number one influence on their decisions about sex." This year ESSENCE joined forces with the National Campaign for an unprecedented study, *Under Pressure: What African-American Teens Aren't Telling You About Sex, Love and Relationships*. The good news is, Black teens do trust their parents as authorities on sex and love: Almost 50 percent wish their parents would talk to them more about how to have a good relationship. The bad news is, more than 60 percent of the 1,500 kids surveyed feel the conversations they've had with their parents aren't helpful.

Experts say the challenge for many African-Americans isn't that we aren't talking, it's that many of us are having the wrong kinds of conversations. "Parents tend to focus on pregnancy prevention in order to keep children on track to fulfill the hopes and dreams they have for them," says Vickie Mays, professor of psychology and health services at UCLA and an expert on race and sexual behavior. "But

"I wish instead of telling me not to have sex my mother would tell me exactly how to say no." —Jasmine, 14

if you want to prevent pregnancy, the conversations can't just be 'Don't, don't, don't.' We need to talk to children about what they're doing, how they're feeling, what they're thinking about." And we need to get up to speed. "Parents are talking to their kids about sex like it's still the 1980's," says Johanna Wright, a health educator and girl's basketball coach at a New Jersey middle school. "With technology it's a whole new world now, and parents need to get with the program because their children's lives are at stake."

But how can we better reach our kids? According to the dozens of

teens interviewed for this story, if you want to get through to your child, you need to know what they're really dealing with. And there is no better place to start the adult education than where children first grapple with issues of love and sex: Welcome to middle school.

HALL PASS

One third of Black girls think boys want them only for sex.†

Marcy and Madison are perched on the last bench in the yellow-tiled girls' locker room of their middle school. Their conversation is punctuated by the dull thud of a basketball echoing in the gym next door. On a nearby wall hangs a poster telling students that determination is the key to success. Beside it, someone has scrawled, "Kendra is a ho."

Marcy and Madison, both 13, talk quickly and over each other. When they both say the exact same thing at the exact same time, they pause and yell "Psyche!" then pick up right where they left off. They are talking about boys and sharing, with much eye rolling, the things they've heard boys say.

"I love you, I'll never leave you," says Marcy. "If you do this, I won't tell anyone," adds Madison. "Why do you want to wait? I've been waiting soooooo long.... I'll coach you through.... Just do this and we'll be cool.... I'll stop if you want me to."

The friends say sometimes the boys at their middle school—who for the most part live in comfortable homes with professional

parents—confront girls with graphic sexual requests and rumors designed to embarrass. "They'll say, 'I heard you swallow,' or they'll make gagging noises," says Marcy. And sometimes, even though the school has a code of behavior that forbids sexual harassment, the boys get physical, flicking the girls' breasts in the hallway between classes. The girls don't report these incidents to their teachers because that will get them labeled "snitch" or "narc," which would make school impossible.

The touching and the talk are bad enough, say the girls. But worse are the mind games. Marcy says her older brother warned her this would happen. And now that

she's in eighth grade she's seeing it for herself. "A guy will want to be with a girl, so he'll have his friends go up to her and just insult her, insult her, insult her, telling her she's ugly, her breasts are lopsided, she has stretch marks, nappy hair, she's fat, whatever you can think of," she says. "Then, when she's feeling really weak and insecure, the guy will come up behind her and tell her, 'I think you're beautiful.' Suddenly, he looks like Prince Charming."

"If you're crying, it's even better," adds Madison. "Then he'll ask you if you want to hang out and talk about it."



Once a boy wins a girl's trust, he'll start campaigning for sexual favors. "And some boys tell everybody you did something even when you didn't," says Marcy. "Or they'll take a picture of you doing something sexual and put it on Facebook. Sometimes I feel as if I'm in the Revolutionary War. Everyone is fighting over who has control."

Even so, these friends note there are girls at school who seem to court the attention, wearing lacy push-up bras that peek out from their tops. "Girls will tote a Victoria's Secret bag as a signal to the boys that they are thinking about sex," says Madison. Some parents are unwitting accomplices: They drop their daughters off at the mall, not realizing the girls are using their credit cards to purchase lingerie.

Loretta Sweet Jemmott is the director of the Center for Health Equity Research at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Nursing and a national expert in abstinence education and research. She says that what these girls are describing is happening in schools across the country. "You send your child to a good school and they're getting good grades and you think everything is fine, but between classes kids are doing things that would blow your mind," says Jemmott. "Children are dealing with enormous pressure to engage in all kinds of sexual activity, no matter the age, color, creed, education or income level of the parents. Children need their parents to help them through this."

Jemmott says the first step is to create an open dialogue with your teen so he or she will tell you what's going on. Begin by asking the right kinds of questions. "We want to stay away from what we call close-ended questions," she explains. "So it's not, 'How was school?' Instead you want to ask open-ended questions like, 'Tell me about your day. How are you feeling?' You want to listen before you start telling them what to do. Your first goal is to let your child know that you are approachable."

THE TROUBLE WITH TV

Forty-eight percent of Black teens feel more pressure to have sex from the media than from partners.

Johanna Wright, the health teacher from New Jersey, is the kind of educator every parent wants for her child. She's informed, unflappable and able to disarm even the most unruly child with a raised eyebrow and a well-timed joke. Although she's been teaching for 38 years, she has remained plugged in to the music, slang and gossip that rule her students' lives, which means she's often the first person they turn to when in trouble. And she has heard everything.

"What parents don't understand is these kids are experimenting with things in middle school that their parents did when they were in college," she says. Over the years Wright has counseled students who have contracted a startling range of STIs, including gonorrhea of the throat, as well as children who were caught performing oral sex in empty classrooms while other students watched. "Kids are seeing these things on TV and the Internet and they are acting them out," she explains. "We are experiencing a sexual revolution and it's only getting worse."

For decades educators and academics have blamed popular culture for negatively impacting kids, and these days consumption is at an all-time high. A 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation

found that African-American children between 8 and 18 spend nearly six hours a day in front of the television, compared with three and a half hours spent by their White counterparts. But while Black teens may watch more hours of programming, they also complain that the images they are seeing of themselves are rarely positive. More than 70 percent of teens who responded to our survey said that Black youth are often portrayed as players or sexually aggressive and irresponsible in romantic relationships. Only 32 percent said they were portrayed as smart. And many of the musicians teens idolize suggest that a woman's worth lies in her sex appeal. Almost two decades ago Mary J. Blige topped the charts wearing boots and a baseball cap. Today's female artists dress in little more

"Some guys get turned on by the simplest things. That's why they're always trying to hug you." —Madison, 13

than a bodysuit and dance like strippers on the pole.

Experts on the front lines of the fight against teen pregnancy suggest that in addition to limiting the amount of time kids spend in front of the television, parents also take a seat beside their child and discuss what they're watching. "If you are viewing a show about a woman who is oversexualized, you can ask your child what he or she thinks about the way the woman is being portrayed or how she is handling the attention," says Nightingale from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. "It's a great opportunity to engage your child in a conversation about what they think and also about your own values."

Talking about MTV's *Teen Mom* may be the easy part. Some parents are finding their children are watching much more graphic content: the hard-core pornography that's available free of charge to anyone with Internet access. More than 40 percent of the teens surveyed say they have gone online to view pornography; 42 percent say they've been shown online porn by a friend. When Joan Smalls* discovered her 14-year-old son had been watching sexually explicit videos on his iPod, she was shocked by the images. "I had to talk to my friends and process it before I talked to my son," she says. "Then my husband and I told our son that we didn't think this was appropriate at his age." After the family talk, Smalls cut off her son's Internet access.

But controlling a child's access to the Web is a battle most parents are unlikely to win. Teens can log on at the library, at their friends' houses or on a borrowed phone and view scenes of every possible sexual scenario, including scenes of violence and extreme degradation. UCLA psychology professor Mays cautions some teens aren't using the images only for stimulation; they are treating porn as instructional videos for how to have sex. "For some children, these images are setting the norm," says Mays. "So the boys might be thinking, *Good sex is when you slap her and pull her hair*. The boys are under pressure to reenact what they are seeing, and the girls are experiencing this at a time when they are just developing. They may begin to believe this is how they should be treated."

Karl Potter, an Atlanta father of a 15-year-old boy, points out that porn often features adults having sex without condoms. "Kids don't know these people are getting tested for HIV weekly >

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and the women are on birth control," he says. "And the fantasy where the girl agrees to anything is not real either. You have to ask girls if it's okay before you try something. And if they say no, that's it. When I speak to my son, I'll say, 'Porn is like basketball and you are watching the All Stars. You don't need to be trying all that. You need to just practice your layups, and your layup right now is kissing. Just practice that.'"

Whether or not a child is viewing porn, parents still have to contend with the sexual curiosity and raging hormones that are a normal part of adolescence. How can we guide our teens to deal with those impulses in age-appropriate ways? Carlos Salguero is a middle school physical education and health teacher. He suggests parents speak to their boys candidly about masturbation. "It's a release," he says. "Anything that can help a boy delay that first sexual experience with a girl is important because after that he's not focused on education. He will spend all day strategizing about how he can get with that girl again. I've seen it happen."

Johanna Wright agrees that parents should be aware that teens are wrestling with their first surges of desire. "We need to talk to kids about that tingly feeling they get when their hands touch," says Wright. "Kids don't know what to do with those emotions. We have to talk to them about infatuation and love. Share with your child the feelings you had when you had a crush—that whole clammy-palms, heart-skips-a-beat feeling. Then the kid trusts you know what you're talking about."

BOYS TO MEN

Forty percent of Black teens have received, via e-mail or text, a nude or seminude photo.

Omar and Isaiah are both tall and athletic and leaping toward manhood. At 13, they've both received plenty of warnings from their parents about not getting girls pregnant. But Omar, who has a mouth full of braces and short dreadlocks that he twists absentmindedly, insists his mother has no idea what he's really up to. "She knows about the kissing," he says. "But she doesn't know about the touching and feeling and blow jobs. If I were to tell her, she'd just give me another lecture about the stuff I know already." Instead these boys seek advice from relatives barely older than themselves. "My cousin who's 15 said I should get as much oral sex as I can," says Isaiah.

According to the boys, this isn't difficult. They say some girls at their middle school are very aggressive. "They text you naked pictures when you don't even ask for them," exclaims Isaiah. "Or they get real freaky on the phone," adds Omar. "They'll say stuff like, 'I'm naked; I wish you could take a shower with me.'" These boys are so used to such overtures that they've developed a studied

nonchalance with which to respond. "After a girl gives you a blow job you have to act like you're not happy," says Omar. "That way she'll come back and to try to make it better."

Of course, not all boys are as sexually active as these two. But for teens who aren't, the pressure to live up to their peers can be enormous. Jason, 13, is known as "the smart one" in his clique of popular boys; he has a keen perspective on the sexual conduct of many of his classmates. "If a dude has something to prove, he might try to push a girl to do something she doesn't want to," he says. "Because if he's the only one of his friends who isn't messing with a girl, he'll be an outcast. Like, I was on Facebook and a guy posted that he wasn't ready for sex yet. All his friends called him gay."

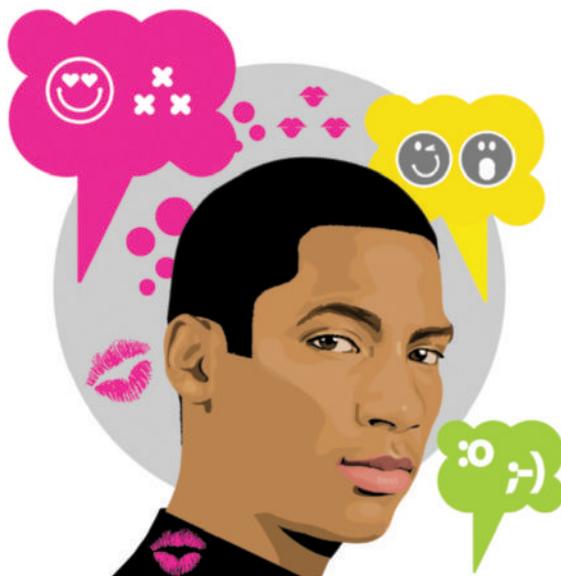
Howard Stevenson, associate professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, says parents need to be cognizant of the pressure adolescent boys are under to appear masculine, and how traumatized they can be by premature sexual activity. Indeed, our study found that one in two African-American boys who has had sex regretted it after. "We need to provide other examples of manhood so boys can try to prove themselves in ways other than acting out sexually," says Stevenson. Parents can point out characteristics they deem valuable in a man—such as self-discipline, loyalty and

integrity—and give their son opportunities to develop these traits.

For some parents, having an open conversation about sex with their children is simply out of the question. It may conflict with their religious beliefs or raise difficult issues about their own pasts. That's understandable, says Mays. "But your children need answers and you can't leave them floundering. If you can't have the conversation yourself, ask someone you trust to substitute. Then you can tell your child, 'When I was growing up my parents never had these discussions with me. Let's have you talk to your aunt while I take a little time to figure this out.'"

"Some boys, after they get what they want, won't talk to a girl anymore. They're like, 'What's the point now that you already gave me oral sex?'" —Jason, 13

Jemmott also reminds parents that some of the conversations that will help your teen delay sex are not directly about intimacy. They have to do with respect and self-esteem. "Girls need to be boosted up," she says. "We need to remind them that they are the prize. Tell your daughter, 'If a boy is not treating you right, you don't have to continue with him because you are valuable!' For boys, we need to remind them to treat girls the way they would want someone to treat their sisters or their mothers. We just have to bring it back to that." ▸



CLOSING THE GAP

Two thirds of Black teens felt “more open and honest” conversations with their parents about sex would help them delay their first time.

It's a sticky summer night and Jasmine is on the phone talking about her ex, the one to whom she lost her virginity months earlier. “He told me he loved me,” she says, “and I thought it was going to last forever. But three months later we broke up. I felt so stupid.”

This isn't the only time Jasmine has gotten carried away. “Even when you say you really don't want to do it, a boy will start touching you and maybe there's some nice sexy song playing and then he'll tell you you're a good kisser. It's just like a magical moment and it gets all crazy,” she says. “Once that happens you just forget about

“If you want your girls not to have sex, put them in sports. Those girls are focused.” —Isaiah, 13

how bad you didn't want to do it.” This is what Jasmine really wants to talk to her mother about. She thinks if she could be more candid her mother might be able to answer her most pressing question. “I wish she would tell me how to say no,” she says.

Of course, the idea of having a conversation about negotiating sexual boundaries with a child who hasn't yet reached high school is daunting to many parents. But there are some mothers who are finding a way to make this work. Jill Evans is an elementary school principal and mother of a 13-year-old girl. “When my daughter was

5 or 6, we would talk about how special her body was,” she says. “I explained that no one has the right to touch her in a way that makes her uncomfortable.” As her child grew older the conversations turned to reproduction and eventually to boys and crushes. “I was not judgmental,” says Evans. “That's the way I would get the information.” At times her daughter's questions have been so explicit they have caught Evans off guard. “But I don't dare say, ‘That's grown-up talk.’ I know if I don't answer, she's going to ask her friends and possibly get wrong information.” Instead Evans praises her daughter for being brave enough to ask.

Recently Evans's daughter shared with her mother the details of her first kiss. “I asked her where the boys hands were,” she recalls. “I told her it was very normal to like boys and have tingling sensations but kissing can lead to other things, and she needs to be prepared for that. We talked about what she plans to do if the boy tries to touch her breasts. I told her it was okay to tell him that he was moving too quickly.

“As mothers we stretch ourselves all the time to do what's right for our children,” Evans continues. “Now we need to stretch ourselves to become more comfortable talking about sex and sexuality. And if you can't do it, read books, call friends, do what you have to do to make it happen. Our children's safety depends on it.” □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for ESSENCE.

**The names of all teens and their parents have been changed.*

†Statistics are from our exclusive survey Under Pressure: What African-American Teens Aren't Telling You About Sex, Love and Relationships.

Let's Talk About Sex

Helping your child delay sex means having frequent conversations about love, trust, intimacy and, yes, sex

Ages 3–5: BEGIN THE DISCUSSION.

Talk to young children about their bodies. Age-appropriate books can aid the conversation. “Be an askable parent early on so that when children get older they don't feel weird coming to you with questions,” says Renee R. Jenkins, professor of pediatrics at Howard University College of Medicine.

Ages 5–10: ESTABLISH YOURSELF AS THE EXPERT.

Answer your child's questions directly. “It's okay to say, ‘I don't know but I'll find

out,’” says Jenkins. Consult books, doctors and friends to get the information your child needs.

Ages 10–13: BE AWARE OF THE PRESSURE YOUR CHILD IS UNDER.

Puberty is kicking in and peer pressure is ramping up. Talk about the qualities of good friendships. Discuss concepts such as respect, love and setting boundaries, and share your values and expectations with your child. Supply your kids with books about changing bodies. Start talks about dating.

Ages 13–15: RAISE THEIR SELF-ESTEEM.

Make sure your child has activities outside of school, such as sports, music or volunteering, to help boost his or her self-esteem. Praise your child's accomplishments to help build confidence. “That kind of positivity is as important as telling them what they can't do,” says Jenkins. Help your child set long-term goals; studies show youngsters with plans for their future are more likely to delay sex.

Ages 15–18: REINFORCE PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS.

Act as your child's executive adviser. Identify situations in which sex is more likely to occur, such as on one-on-one dates or at

unchaperoned parties and events where there may be underage drinking. Discuss scenarios and help your teen strategize exit plans. Direct your teens to trusted Web sites, such as stayteen.org, so they can gather more information themselves.

Ages 18 and up: WARN THEM ABOUT RISKY SITUATIONS.

Kids who are college age and older, especially those living on their own, need to know that drug or alcohol consumption can lead to sexual activity they may later regret and increase their vulnerability to sexual assault, date rape and unsafe sex. Stay involved by asking questions, and encourage your child to visit abovetheinfluence.com.