

Love, Sex and the Teenage Brain

Teen romance and the possibility of sex.... It is one of the trickiest and difficult topics that we, as parents, talk to our kids about. Making sure your teenager has good information and a healthy attitude about opposite sex relationships is a challenging parental responsibility. We know that our teenagers are going to parties, hanging out together, sometimes drinking and some are having sex. According to a 2005 Statistics Canada report:

- About 12% of teens have had sexual intercourse by age 15 and by the time they reach the age of 17, 28% teens have. By age 24, 80% of young adults have had sexual intercourse.
- Of the sexually active youth between age 15 and 24, over one third of them had more than one partner in a year and 30% did not use a condom the last time they had intercourse.
- Teen pregnancy has been steadily decreasing over the past 25 years. However the number of teens who have contracted sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as Chlamydia remains on the rise. This points to reduced use of condoms or the prevalence of oral sex which many teens mistakenly believe eliminates the transmission of STDs.

So, as parents, what sort of influence do we have? According to a 2005 University of Regina in Saskatchewan study, teachers emerged as the most important source for information about pregnancy and STD prevention. The study also found that peer influence was more important than parental disapproval in predicting whether a student would have intercourse. The findings suggest that, teachers and peers are more important in providing good information and instilling attitudes to our teenagers than parents. Parental disapproval has little impact. In fact parental disapproval often has the opposite effect one is trying to accomplish.

Romance and the Teenage Brain

The conflict between young love and parental disapproval is not a new one. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliette*, his "star crossed lovers" showed what havoc teen romance can have on families. Today, perhaps it is understandable and acceptable for school to be a more important source of information than parents on certain information about sex. However, most of us hope our values are important to our children and help guide their sexual behaviour choices.

When your son or daughter has fallen in love the personality change may seem extreme. It like they have been invaded by an alien body snatcher. The power of teen love and sex is very strong. Many parents feel responsible for their teenager's risky behaviour and become overwhelmed with feelings of guilt. Parents and especially mothers often feel the judgement of other parents whose teen's behaviour is less extreme This can lead to additional feelings of isolation and ineffectiveness. Some parents and especially fathers may get authoritative out of frustration and eventually give up or "wash their hands" of the problem out of feelings of ineptitude.

To be more influential it helps to equipped with the knowledge of what forces are at work when a teenager falls in love. It is important to understand how the teen brain works. Recent brain scientific research sheds much more light on how much hormonal activity is influencing our teenager's thoughts and actions.

Brain structures and brain chemicals both affect the way an adolescent first dives into romance. In his book *Why Do They Act That Way?: A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*, David Walsh describes it this way. At around age ten, the body produces androgen hormones. This is when the first crush can occur. It is at puberty when the real awakening of sexual interest and sex drive occurs. This is when "falling in love" can happen. The hypothalamus drives surges of testosterone in both boys and girls and raises the levels of dopamine - the hormone that is responsible for feelings of pleasure. Because of developmental differences, boys and girls have different attitudes toward sex and romance. The testosterone surges in boys lead them to see girls as sexual objects. Adolescent girls tend to be more drawn to boys for the relational aspects of spending time together and talking.

Although sexual interest is always part of falling in love, falling in love is not always part of sex drive. The prefrontal cortex (the place of reason and judgement in the brain) is inactive and in teenagers not yet fully developed. When falling in love, we aren't using our rational brain and impulse control. A "pleasure" high comes from the hormonal interplay of dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin. It is a powerful mix of natural neurological "chemistry". All this high level of hormonal fireworks cannot be sustained for a long time by the brain. The intense feelings of "falling in love" are even shorter for teenagers than adults. Infatuation lasts only about three months on average. Following this they will move on to another relationship for the intoxication and excitement or will stay as the relationship transitions into a calmer more comfortable stable state, which has been called "standing in love".

During the “standing in love” phase cooling down occurs and the prefrontal cortex engages. The teen is in a better position to assess the suitability of the relationship. The adolescent may wonder, “Why am I in this relationship?” A different set of hormones are released now. For girls it is oxytocin sometimes referred to as the “cuddling” hormone, also involved at childbirth, which promotes attachment. In boys, the hormone vasopressin makes them more protective, faithful and attentive to their partner’s needs.

Romantic Pitfalls

Often parents worry about their child falling in love with a “bad apple”. Concern about a teenager’s judgement is warranted. The prefrontal cortex is not completely formed in the brain until age 21. In this stupor of love, the bad influence of the boyfriend or girlfriend leads the “good” child to do things quite out of character. For example they may engage in some risky behaviour out of loyalty and love such as destroy property for the “rush” of it.

Sometimes the darker side of love of jealousy and possessiveness takes hold. It is confusing for many teenagers. After the glorious “falling in love” feelings and then attachment hormones can cloud the judgement. He can become controlling, or physically or sexually abusive. When the “why am I in this relationship?” question comes to mind, her memories of the “falling in love” times and the current cuddling hormone and lack of experience make it more difficult to see the wisdom of getting out.

Tips for Talking to Teens about Sex

Countries with low rates of teen pregnancy and STDs deal with sex more openly. If trusted adults, teachers and parents don’t talk openly, the adolescents will get their information from peers or the media. It is important to distinguish sex from sexuality. Sex is about biology whereas sexuality is about biology, psychology, values and spirituality. It is important for you to see your role as supplementing the logic, wisdom and judgement that the teen’s under developed prefrontal cortex requires. Actively listening, validating feelings and show respect will help open up discussions and reduce power struggles.

David Walsh in his book *Why Do They Act That Way?*, suggests the following tips and do's and don'ts.

Tips

1. Get motivated. If you do not talk to them someone else will.
2. Get educated. Being informed overcomes nervousness and builds confidence
3. Get comfortable. It is ok to admit some discomfort. It will help everyone relax.
4. Make it an ongoing conversation.
5. Don't try to cover too much in one discussion.
6. Choose appropriate times when there is an opportunity for calm, private uninterrupted conversation
7. Discuss sexuality, not just sex. They need to know about the place of sex in a healthy relationship.
8. Discuss dating as a time to have fun and get to know each other.
9. Don't preach or lecture.
10. Make it a dialogue
11. Share your values

Do

- Emphasize the importance of respect and honesty in all relationships
- Have regular conversations with your sons and daughters about sex and sexuality
- Communicate the values you consider important in romantic relationships
- Provide accurate information about birth control and STDs
- Get to know your adolescent's friends so you know who they are influenced by
- Really listen to your teen: their fears, and worries and validate their feelings showing acceptance and love
- Talk to other parents, join a parents group, see a counsellor for ideas and support

Don't

- Don't get angry or use put-downs about a boyfriend or girlfriend you have concerns about
- Don't ridicule or make fun of crushes or romantic attachments
- Don't assume that your son or daughter won't engage in sexual behaviour
- Don't keep quiet and let the "instant sex" that happens on TV and in movies become the only examples your kids have about sex and sexuality