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Sexual Decision-Making Among Teens

Introduction

Adolescents often struggle with making informed conscious decisions about sex. This may be especially true for teens we work with due to the environments from which many of them come. Our teens in foster care may benefit from opportunities to test their knowledge, ask questions, reflect on their values, and try out their communication skills with their CASAs.

The Facts

Teen Sexual Relationships

Teens enter into sexual relationships for a variety of reasons, including as an expression of love, a need for affection or acceptance, a desire for intimacy, experimentation, testing relationships, peer pressure and even manipulation. Partners' reasons may not always be the same or be understood by each other.

Some teens consciously think about the consequences of engaging in sexual activity before doing it. However, much of teen sexual activity tends to be spontaneous, unplanned, and sometimes involuntary.

- Although many teens don't intend to get pregnant, often they also don't plan to prevent pregnancy.
- For some adolescents, the notion of prevention is influenced by an unrealistic idea of parenting. The idea that a baby may be someone who will always be there for them, and always love them may influence them to become pregnant.

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- Some teens have sex with their partners because they fear the partner will leave them if they don't. They feel pressured to have sex to keep a partner, even though they don't know if this would work or if it is the price they want to pay.
- LGBTQ couples similarly experience differences in power which can lead to one partner making all of the decisions at the expense of the other.
- Some teens give in to the pressure to fit in because they think that everyone else is doing it. It seems like everyone is talking about doing it, so they assume more kids are actually doing it. Youth share that, **"If we think everyone else is doing it, then even if we don't want to do it ourselves, we may feel pressure to do it to be like everyone else."**
- Use and abuse of drugs and alcohol can lower inhibitions, impact a person's ability to make decisions and lead to unprotected sex, among many other things.
- Nonconsensual sex is either rape (vaginal intercourse) or sexual assault (other sexual acts). Rape and sexual assaults are serious crimes.
Nonconsensual sex is:
 - Forcing someone to have sex (force can be physical or psychological)
 - Going further sexually when the other person says "no" or "stop"
 - Going further sexually when the other person is too drunk or high to make a conscious decision
 - Coercing or tricking someone to have sex

Sexual responsibility is everyone's concern, regardless of gender. All teens need to receive the same information about sexual relationships, their responsibilities, and the prevention of pregnancies and transmission of sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

Starting a CASA Conversation

The subject of sexual decision making is most appropriately addressed in the context of evidence that a CASA's teen may have engaged in, or plans to engage in, sexual activity; when a CASA's teen brings up the topic or asks a question; or when a teen otherwise indicates that he/she has issues or concerns (however peripheral). It takes a lot of courage for some teens to raise questions or concerns involving sexual feelings, intimate relationships and decisions. Thus, CASAs working with teens need to be alert to signs that a teen may be troubled, confused or asking 'peripheral' questions "for a friend."

*"What is true love?
What did I need from a
supportive adult? I
didn't have any love –
so when I had
someone tell me "I
love you," it fulfilled
that need to have
someone who cared
about me" - Luz*

It is generally not appropriate for a CASA to bring the subject up on his/her own. Bringing up the topics of sexual relationships, sexual activity, sexual decision making and/or contraception totally out of context may lead the teen and/or his/her parents (biological or foster parents) to question the CASA's assumptions and motivations.

Teens need to learn how to negotiate their sexual experiences in positive and responsible ways.

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CASAs can help them by:

- Taking the time to listen – and not interrupting. Teens will often confide in you if they feel that are really being heard, and they will stop talking and shut down if they feel you aren't listening respectfully.
- Giving them clear and correct information. Be truthful, honest and available.
- Encouraging them to talk about sex and its consequences with their partner.
- Discussing, and role playing, ways to counter unwanted sexual pressure, including peer pressure.
- Stressing the importance of always using contraception, including condoms, if they are sexually active; and reviewing the guidelines of condom use with them (See Additional Resources: Guide to the Use of Condoms)
- Discussing values, morals, and ethics with regard to sex — without lecturing, but with open questions. Teens need accurate information, not a recitation of our own personal opinions and values. Solid information and an awareness of their own values can help guide youth so that when they become sexually active, they will have a greater chance of making informed choices and avoiding risky accidents.
- Keeping the lines of communication open.

When starting a conversation:

- Create a safe setting for teens to talk. It is generally easier for teens to process information when they feel safe enough to express their feelings without fear of judgment.
- Begin by listening to what the teen is asking, saying and/or feeling.
- Ask open questions to help you, and the teen, to better understand the problem, situation, concern or question; and to assist the teen in considering options leading to the resolution of the situation.

You may want to ask questions like:

- "Would you like to tell me about that?"
- "What happened next?"
- "How did you feel about that?"
- "What did you do then?"
- "What do you know about _____?"

"I would shut down if I saw judgement" - Eric

- Paraphrase the teen's portrayal of the situation as appropriate and repeat it back to the teen to ensure that you have understood what s/he has said or meant to say, and to demonstrate to the teen that you are listening. Paraphrasing helps to both:
 - Encourage the teen to continue talking, and
 - Clear up confusion. For example, you might say: "Let's see if I have understood it properly. You tell me what I just said about _____ and I'll go over it again if it's not clear".
- Provide information as appropriate and relevant to the teen's problem, situation, question, etc., being careful not to impose your own values.
- Show empathy through saying: "I know that these things can be very difficult..."

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- Let the teen know that the problem and decision are his/hers, that he/she is responsible for the consequences of his/her actions, that you have confidence that he/she is capable of resolving the problem by making the decision that is best for him/her, and that you will always be available to him/her. So for example, you might say: **“What steps can you take to make a good decision?”**
- Be open and respectful of the teen’s experience. Talking down to teens, showing discomfort with lesbian or gay teens, and failing to address issues like sexual violence, homophobia, or abortion, ignore the experience of many youth.
- Assist the teen in problem-solving. Through listening, posing open questions and paraphrasing, help him/her:
 - Identify his/her problem, what contributed to it and what he/she sees as the consequences.
 - Identify possible actions he/she might take to solve the problem
 - Identify the pros and cons/advantages and disadvantages of each possible action.
 - Choose the action or solution that he/she feels will best solve the problem and that he/she is capable of and committed to carrying out.
- Offer suggestions in the following manner if it appears the teen is ignoring viable choices:
 - “Might it be possible that _____?”
 - “Would it be possible to ___?”
 - “How do you feel about _____?”
 - “What do you think about _____?”
 - “What might happen if _____?”
 - “In what ways could _____?”
- As appropriate, ask the teen what he/she would like you to do to assist him/her, and how you can support him/her – without assuming control and responsibility for the problem.
- Indicate to the teen that you acknowledge his/her emotions (anger, fear, anxiety) related to the situation. Some teens are not used to talking to adults about how they feel, do not have the words to describe how they feel, feel guilty or ashamed, and/or expect to be criticized or punished for how they feel or what they have done.
- Be aware of how your tone of voice and facial expression can communicate empathy and understanding. Jokes, smiles and laughs at appropriate moments can help the teen to relax and trust you.
- Try to understand why the teen may not always tell you the truth. Some reasons include:
 - Wishing that things were different
 - Avoidance of a painful subject
 - Fear of the consequences of others knowing what they have done
 - Wanting to say “the right thing” or what they think you want to hear
 - They may not yet fully trust you.
- Ask the teen how he/she will know when he/she has made the right decision. This can help give him/her more confidence in his/her own judgment and help him/her to resist being manipulated by others.

“I found out the way not to love. Some kids see domestic violence in their families and think that is what love is”
- Nef

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- Always try to conclude the conversation with something positive, based on what the teen has told you or you have noted. **Express your faith in the adolescent's abilities.** Emphasize positive qualities, ways forward, and optimism.
- You can do this through offering some of these statements:
 - "I believe in you, and I know that you can do this, when you decide the time is right."
 - "You showed a lot of courage to address this situation."
 - "I sense that you are not feeling strong at the moment but you have shown a lot of strength in the way in which you have dealt with this situation."
 - "You seem very good at _____ (communicating your feelings, dealing with peer pressure, setting your boundaries)"

Pitfalls to Avoid

Don't be the person who provides information about contraception. If teens wish to discuss the choice of methods of contraception that they might use, refer them to a competent family planning service provider. Your CASA program should know who the recommended service providers are for teens in your community. CASAs engaging in conversations of contraceptive choice and the pros and cons of various methods may lead to confusion. What a CASA may know or recommend may not correspond to what a family planning service provider knows. A competent FP service provider is in a better position to give accurate information about contraceptive methods, the pros and cons of each method, and instructions for use.

Avoid interrupting or reacting when a teen's view doesn't make sense or differs from yours. Avoid trying to help him/her to see the reasoning behind your "more logical position," or trying to convince him/her of your point of view. As adults, when we do these things, we tend to:

- Become more interested in our own point of view rather than in the other person's
- Criticize them and/or their position
- No longer listen. (One cannot really hear what someone else has to say and talk at the same time.)
- Not benefit from fully understanding their point of view, which may be logical in terms of their own experience, values and/or situation. When talking with teens about sex, it is very important to understand their point of view/situation in order to better help them.
- Frustrate them. They may feel like what they had to say wasn't even taken into consideration.
- Judge their decisions or behavior on the basis of incomplete information. We almost never know all the factors that influence the decisions of others.

Additional Resources

Planned Parenthood Official Site:

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/>

American Academy of Pediatrics Making Healthy Decisions About Sex:

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/dating-sex/Pages/Making-Healthy-Decisions-About-Sex.aspx>

Rape and Sexual Assault:

<http://www.safehorizon.org/page/rape--sexual-assault-54.html>

"I wanted that love and affection so much, I knew where I wasn't getting it - I can see the red flags when it isn't there. It's good to have a CASA in your life to show you what it is" - Miguel