



Discussion Guide

For Adults Working with Teens

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Thinking Twice about Having Sex

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When 18-year-old Rachel first had sex, she didn't really think about what she was "getting into." She says she didn't really consider what losing her virginity meant to her, especially emotionally.

"I wanted the guy I was with to like me more, perhaps love me," says Rachel, who lives in Boulder, CO. "I thought I had true feelings for him, but after a year and a half of growing up, I realized it was an infatuation."

Rachel is like many teens who have sex for the first time not because they're really ready emotionally and physically, but because they feel pressured, want to be loved, and other non-sexually related reasons.

Too Much, Too Soon

According to the 2001 national Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 46 percent of high-school students have had sexual intercourse. And there are varying influences that contribute to their decision to say "yes" to sex.

In a recent national SexSmarts survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Seventeen magazine, 58 percent of 15- to 17-year-olds who've had sex said they did so because they just "wanted to get it over with." Eighty-four percent agreed to sex because their "partner wanted to." Other influences were peer pressure and the fear of being left behind.

Are these good reasons to have sex, a potentially risky behavior with consequences like unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)? Sometimes when teens have sex when they're not ready, they don't take precautions, like using contraception. The rush to have sex and the desire to get it over with can blind them to potential consequences.

According to the SexSmarts survey, 17 percent of teens believe that condoms or other birth-control methods are not necessary the first time. And a surprising 54 percent say that they weren't even thinking about STDs, including HIV/AIDS, the first time they had sex. Rachel includes herself in that statistic.

"I didn't use a condom and I wasn't on birth control my first time. STDs and pregnancy weren't concerns to me."

Rattled by the Rush

Despite these risks, why do some teens rush? Why do they feel pressured to "just get it over with"? According to Konstance McCaffree, Ph.D., sexuality education coordinator at Widener University, in Chester, PA, teens may rush into sex to feel grown-up.

"It may be one of the first decisions that feel 'mature,' because adults are assumed to be engaging in sexual intercourse. So doing anything adults do can make people feel grown-up in their minds."

Seventeen-year-old Ileana Cruz, of Norfolk, VA, agrees.

"I think some teens give up their virginity, because they perceive it to be a beautiful thing that will make them feel more like an adult."

McCaffree also says that some teens rush, because being a virgin feels like a burden when there's so much talk about sex.

"If your friends are experiencing sex, you have no one to talk to since you aren't," she says.

She adds that teens who feel the burden of virginity will more likely have sex the first opportunity they get, with a willing partner, without planning. In other words, they'll be less likely to protect themselves. This is another reason why rushing into sex is not the best course of action.

Eighteen-year-old Carlos Martinez, of New York City, says he knows "girls and guys who want to get sex over with, because they want to be experienced in the future and they feel like everyone is doing it."

McCaffree explains that even though "we always want to be able to do what others our age do," our decisions should not be based on peer pressure. Caving in to pressure can easily distort our decision-making skills.

Taking Time

Rachel Ingalla, 16, of Lake View Terrace, CA, first had sex because of peer pressure.

“I should have listened to my instincts to run away,” she says.

Instead, she had sex when she wasn’t ready. Now, with her current boyfriend, she waited until she felt the time was right and she was more prepared.

“There was no pressure,” she says. “It was the first time in my life I fully trusted someone.”

Even though it can be hard to make good decisions about sex when you feel pressure from a partner or peers, it’s important to remember that you don’t have to please anyone but yourself.

Although nearly 50 percent of high-school students are having sex, the other half are not. There is no correct or incorrect time to have sex, but there is a time when you have to understand whether you can handle the potential consequences and are ready to use protection.

McCaffree encourages teens who are contemplating any sexual behavior to “stop, think, and then take action to make sure they are well protected.”

Ileana Cruz offers some final teen-to-teen advice: “Make whatever you do special and do it because you want to. You want it to be a time you will never forget, not a time that you don’t want to remember.”

Additional reporting by national correspondents Samantha Freedman, 17, of Calabasas, CA; Stephanie Nival, 18, of New York City; Channel Porter, 16, of Norfolk, VA; and Lieschen Gargano, 17, of Boulder, CO.

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