SEX, ETC.

(Continued from page 50) says Cydney Bain, 17, one of ten editors. “Our website does an incredibly amazing job of getting it out there.”

Sex, Etc., the website, gets 30,000 unique visitors a day. For the MySpace generation, the Web is familiar territory—and so is sexual activity. Twenty-six percent of New Jersey ninth-graders report having had sexual intercourse, as do 68 percent of high school seniors.

“The question is, how do you position the information that you’re providing in a way that kids are going to find credible, meaningful, and accessible?” asks Beth Kraemer, director of Answer, a national comprehensive sex ed organization within the Center for Applied Psychology at Rutgers. Adult staff at Answer support and oversee the teenagers’ work on Sex, Etc.

Answer’s answer is to encourage teens to speak for themselves. On a recent Saturday afternoon at the Rutgers Piscataway campus, Bain and the rest of the Sex, Etc. staff brainstormed ideas for the spring issue. The group dynamic is at once earnest and jocular. They jump off-topic to discuss hit songs or news. But when they get back to work, their directness is startling.

“They’re so brave, and they want to tackle the hard topics,” says Answer’s Lucinda Holt, 36, who has served as managing editor of Sex, Etc. since 2006. “They’re willing to change their minds on things and they want to have these conversations.”

It’s not always easy. Michael Schwab, a seventeen-year-old from Maplewood, says he didn’t feel comfortable writing about sex when he first joined the magazine. “I mostly wrote about the etc. part,” he says. He has since settled in, writing an article in the fall issue on casual sex, or what kids call hooking up. “Once you get really involved in this and realize how many kids don’t know about sex, it’s easy to get behind this project.”

Contributors have varying backgrounds and by no means consider themselves experts. Leora Cohen-Rosenberg, a sixteen-year-old from Long Island, says she hasn’t been taught a sex ed class in school but has had frank discussions about sex with her parents. New Brunswick’s Karen Choucraallah, 17, jokes that she didn’t think her dad had any idea she was writing about sex for a magazine. Sharanya Durvasula, a seventeen-year-old from Princeton Junction, took comprehensive sex ed classes in school, learning about both abstinence and safe sex. A friend of hers in another town was taught only abstinence. “The only time they mentioned condoms was when they talked about failure rates,” Durvasula says. “It’s like they’re withholding information.”

Abstinence isn’t ignored at Sex, Etc.—type the word into the search feature and 322 articles are listed. But there’s also extensive information on how to talk to your partner about sex, protect yourself from STDs, and avoid unplanned pregnancy. “If someone comes to our site with an abstinence-only lens and spends time there in a thoughtful manner,” says Kraemer, “they’re going to see that we don’t have an agenda except to keep teens healthy.”

Underwritten by grant money, Sex, Etc. has been published three times a year since 1994. It’s distributed through subscriptions and venues such as schools, clinics, and libraries. And it’s just one part of Answer’s mission—for more than 25 years, the organization has also trained professionals to teach comprehensive sexual health education. Kraemer points out that no matter how effective a teacher is in a classroom, certain subjects never come up. Boys who visit the site, for example, often express anxiety about penis size. “They’re not going to ask that question to a teacher, a parent, or even a friend,” she says. “The ability to ask it anonymously is very important.”

Most of the teenage staff plan to pursue careers in writing. Several say their experience at the magazine has inspired them to focus on writing about sexual health. “I want to become a resource for my friends,” says Kira Jones, 17, of Moorestown.

Coming of age in Texas in the ‘80s, managing editor Holt quickly got the message that she was expected to suppress her sexual self, a circumstance she reflects on in her essay “To Shame I Say, ‘No, Thank You!’” published last year in the anthology What Your Mama Never Told You: True Stories About Sex and Love. She says she’s found her calling working with the kids of Sex, Etc.

“We live in a culture that’s very sexualized, where kids can see bodies and all kinds of stuff,” she says. “They see all this going on, but they don’t learn what it takes to respect one another. We provide the other side of that sexualization.”

BY TEENS, FOR TEENS

A Rutgers-backed program gets teens to write openly and informatively about love and sex—and the whirlwind of emotions they engender. By Jessica Kitchin

Google the words teen and sex, and you’ll get links to sites with names too racy to print. A more specific (and racier) search yields how-to instruction for a variety of acts but little mention of sexually transmitted disease or—perhaps just as important—the attendant emotions.

Enter Sex, Etc. This Rutgers-supported website (sexetc.org) and its corresponding print magazine offer in-depth info on sex, hormones, body image, drugs, and the relationship of all those things to what teenagers are most concerned about—relationships. It’s edited by high school students, most from the Garden State.

“There’s so much information that’s not mainstream to teens,”

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