Boy Talk

Isn’t condom sense *their* job, too?

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It’s hard enough talking about sexual health with teenage girls—what about their hormone-happy male counterparts? “I try to reason with them,” says Robert Michael Johnson, 31, a high school counselor in uptown Manhattan’s working-class Washington Heights. “They have their girls on the side and they have their ‘wifey,’” Johnson explains, “so they use protection with the girls but not with ‘wifey.’ There’s no real sense of responsibility.” He attributes that partly to the pressures of racism and poverty. “These boys are used to dealing with constant hate and violence. You may never get them to change their minds completely but you can plant speed- bumps in their road so...they’ll stop and think.”

One of Johnson’s success stories is 19-year-old “Damon,” who says he’s been completely monogamous with his girlfriend for two years—“’cause I don’t wanna catch nothing”—and they’ve always practiced safer sex, even though, he confides, “plenty of people aren’t.” Back in his bachelor days, he says, he’d insist on the latex only to hear girls balk “What’s the matter? Do I look sick?”

Damon’s not alone—not in Brooklyn, at least, where most informally surveyed black teenage boys said they dutifully rolled down a rubber “every time.” Then there was 17-year-old “Freddy,” a strapping, caramel-colored grocery clerk who said he hated condoms; called girls bitches, ho’s and heifers; and dismissed any talk of personal responsibility, HIV testing, his health or his future. “We’ll cross that bridge if and when we come to it,” he said. “It don’t matter ’cause I don’t play that freak shit.”

Such nihilism doesn’t surprise Johnson. “There’s this phrase I hear from kids all the time,” he says. “‘If it’s gonna happen, it’s gonna happen.’ [These boys] come from such chaotic households, there’s nothing to look forward to. The trick is to help give them vision for the long term.”

Freddy, meanwhile, has his hands full: “I got three ladies going at any given time. They don’t wanna see [condoms]. They’ll think I’m foolin’ around.”

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