Bubblegum Sex Wars

July 1, 2000 By Shana Naomi Krochmal

Just try to find a touchier subject than teen sexuality—the mere mention is enough to raise the eyebrows of even those self-absorbed, money-grubbing career parents often blamed for our supposed moral decline. Imagine them rushing home early to interrogate their children after a struggling Talk magazine ran an over-the-top exposé titled “The Sex Lives of Your Children” in its February issue. Writer Lucinda Franks got chatty with a carefully selected group of well-off urban and suburban kids. The teens’ after-school specials—all seemingly selected to shock readers—included unsupervised parties at which kids watched porn and imitated the actors.

Unlike the investigations of a critically acclaimed PBS Frontline special last October about a suburban Atlanta teen syphilis outbreak, “The Lost Children of Rockdale County,” Franks’ take on the teens was three parts judgment to every smidgen of observation. The kids she spoke with are “emblematic of a new generation that uses sex as play, free from the burdens of intimacy or even warmth,” she wrote, and they’re indulging “in behavior that seems a far cry from what their parents’ generation called ‘free love.’”

Nostalgia for a mythical era aside, teenagers wanting to have sex is nothing new, and neither is teenagers actually having sex. What might be changing is how those teens have sex, but the many obstacles to funding studies on teen sex make it hard to know. The Talk piece and the Frontline segment both focused on the casual acceptance of oral sex, and featured interviews with teens who named HIV as a major motivation for postponing sexual intercourse in favor of other sexual activities.

What’s unclear is if this actually represents a change in behavior. According to the CDC, 90 percent of high-schoolers have had some form of AIDS education, but there’s no official data to determine what effect that information has had. The CDC surveys teen behavior of those who have had intercourse (see right), but more sexually explicit surveys have been nixed by Congress.

Meanwhile, private foundations have stepped in. The California-based Kaiser Family Foundation has helped conduct studies in conjunction with two cable-TV networks and three different magazines that target young women. And unlike their media counterparts, these sources aren’t avoiding the tough questions.

A recent Seventeen survey, for example, found that half of the teens polled thought oral sex counted as sex. “A lot of people said that Clinton affected this answer,” said Gayle Forman, the Seventeen editor who coordinated the study. “But I think it’s more because of safe-sex messages.

Teens can now differentiate between different kinds of sex."

If the 55 percent of teens age 13 to 19 who have had oral sex were all gay men, we would say that they were choosing to have lower-risk sex in order to lessen their chances of transmission. And though fear-mongers might be encouraged by the accompanying statistic that 55 percent of teens thought oral sex was "gross" (oddly, the same number who said they had done the deed), they view this instead as confirmation of the moral decline of the free world.

If we've so sufficiently scared kids into an awareness of sexual consequences—a YM magazine sex poll found that for 69 percent of respondents, fear of getting an STD, including HIV, was a main reason for postponing intercourse—the least we can do is report their behavior accurately and without judgment. And we can offer accurate, nonjudgmental information about the transmission of HIV and other STDs and let them make their own decisions. "We so often get down on teens and whatever they do," Seventeen's Forman said. "They need to know what's happening—we can't bury our heads in the sand, too."

NOOKIE NUMBERS
Teens (13–19) who…

…have had sexual intercourse:
48% Girls: **47.7%**
Boys: **48.9%** (CDC)

…think most of their peers are having sex: **75%** (*Seventeen*, 2.00)

…have had four or more
sexual partners: **16%** (CDC)

…used alcohol or drugs the last time they had sex: **25%** (CDC)
…used a condom "absolutely all the time": **46%**
"Nearly all the time": **25%** (*Seventeen*, 2.00)

…have never discussed STDs with a health care provider: **57%** Have never been tested for an STD: **70%**
(*Teen People*, 4.99)

…cannot name an STD other than HIV: **11%**
(*Teen People*, 4.99)

…said that oral sex counts as sex: **45%** (*Seventeen*, 2.00)

…have never told their parents about any sexual activity, because they're "afraid Mom and Dad wouldn't be able to handle it": 56% (*Seventeen*, 2.00)

...got most of their info about sex from friends: **85%**
(YM, 2.00)

...did not think there was too much sex on television: **75%** (YM, 2.00)

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