Growing Pains

Shari Margolese's son understands HIV. So why can't they talk sex?

August 1, 2004 By Shari Margolese

At the door, giggling girls wonder if he's home. On a three-way call, they hee-hee as they ask him who he likes. The nicknames on his online buddy list—"Blond Little Hottie," "Wanna Be Your Girlfriend"—read like personal ads. His showers are starting to last a half-hour. Everywhere I look, I see signs that it's time to talk to my 11-year-old HIV positive son about sex.

I'd always thought it would be easy. I was diagnosed with HIV just after he was born and quickly became an educator. Like many other budding professional HIVers, my first speaking "gigs" were safer-sex talks to schoolkids. I used words that I had rarely heard during my 1960s suburban Canadian upbringing—penis and vagina, for example. The bulk of my sex education was a smack from my father when he found out I was sexually active—and then a trip to the doctor for a birth-control prescription. I long ago decided that any child of mine would get all the information my parents never gave me. But now that it's time for "the talk," why am I so terrified?

The scary complexities of the situation have come crashing down. Although I've taught my son gradually about what it means to have HIV—and he's handled it like a trooper—I won't let him disclose his status much beyond our immediate family. He's too young to handle the rejection he'll inevitably face, and I want him to have a childhood before he faces it. But as he grows up, I also want his relationships with women to be based on honesty, and in his case, honesty will mean disclosing. It's a catch-22 I hadn't considered. I plan on sharing with him my belief that the longer he waits to disclose to a partner, the worse off he'll be. But ultimately, as long as he's having safe sex, it's his decision.

I also worry about how this all might affect me. It's easy to imagine my son becoming intimate with a girl his age and her parents freaking out, concerned that their daughter might have been infected—at worst, leaving me in a legal gray area, at best leaving me to put her parents at ease.

The truth is, there's only so much help I can be to my son. I've never lived as a young HIV positive sexual being, and he'll face challenges I've never dealt with. I married an HIV positive man—not my son's father—shortly after my diagnosis; after we divorced, I immediately met my current partner. He's a laidback, HIV negative guy who is untroubled by my and my son's having HIV (he says it's PMS he can't handle). We've been together for six years, and although we're not married, my son calls him Dad. I'm fortunate to have Dad; he wants to talk to my son about sex, too. But sometimes I'm not sure he has a clearer plan than I do. He jokes that he'll just flip on the Playboy

Channel and “tell the boy to wrap it up.”

I recently flipped on *Days of Our Lives* (my favorite soap), and when it started getting steamy, I asked my son if he understood what was happening. Maybe it wasn’t the subtlest ploy, but I know I can’t put off the sex talk forever. My son is popular, handsome and built like an athletic teenager, qualities girls don’t miss. I know for a fact that he has fast and slow danced with two *different* girls at a school event.

“Mom,” he replied as we watched Shawn and Belle making out, “I don’t want to know that yet.”

“OK,” I said, anxious not to push him away—and happy to delay the inevitable. “But you know we have to talk about it sometime.”

“I know, Mom.”

I guess I’ll just keep looking for signs, ones that neither of us can ignore.

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