



Hooking Up, Losing Out: The New Culture of Teen Sex **By Stephen G. Wallace, M.S. Ed.**

Recent episodes of group oral sex that rocked a well-heeled New England prep school – coupled with similar incidents in a diverse set of communities across the country – raise important questions about early intimacy among teens and the physical, social, and emotional toll it can take on young lives. Just as important, it points to the “reality gap” between increasingly normative sexual behavior among youth and commonly held perceptions of adults.

Perhaps the public nature of these private tales may at last awaken the sleeping giant of parental awareness and action needed to keep teens safe.

Sure, sexual behavior among adolescents is nothing new. But what is new is the startling casualness and regularity with which the “hooking up” takes place ... among friends and strangers, in groups and in public. Does it matter? It very well might.

With sexual activity being reported by one-quarter of middle school students and almost two-thirds of high school students, related disease and illness have been called epidemic. And the psychological outfall isn't far behind.

Tellingly, many girls and boys who have been sexually active say they wish they had waited. Recent research may tell us why.

Results from a SADD *Teens Today* study indicate that adolescents who engage in early sexual behavior experience higher levels of stress and depression than do their non-sexually active peers. And a report by The Heritage Foundation links teen sexual intercourse with suicide:

- Of girls, 14.3 percent of those who had sex had attempted suicide, compared with 5.1 percent of virgins.
- For boys, six percent of those who had sex had attempted suicide, compared with seven-tenths of one percent who were virgins.

Adolescent sexual behavior has long been linked to gender stereotypes, such as ones that suggest boys want, and should seek, all the sex they can get and that girls are simply targets of turbocharged testosterone. Both of these stereotypes hurt teens – boys because they feel pressure to be sexually active and girls because they often cannot “safely” discuss or explore their sexuality.

But the shifting culture of teen sex may soon reshape those views, although not necessarily for the better. Justin, a fourteen-year-old eighth grader, says, “Teachers think it's the boys trying to get sex but now it's the girls.” Seventeen-year-old Neil agrees, “They're like guys now, pointing out who they had sex with, ‘I did him, I did him, I did him.’”

The “hunter-gatherer” subtext common in such analysis does little to adequately frame the complicated nature of sexual decision-making, by boys or girls.

During adolescence, psychology (eagerness for independence, control, and acceptance) joins with biology in a fuse that may lead quickly to intimacy. Still-developing adolescent brains wrestling with judgment and inhibition can then provide the spark, especially in a media culture that disconnects sex from almost anything else and implies that “everyone is doing it.”

Fortunately, decisions about sex are not made in a vacuum. Teens weigh all kinds of factors when making choices about personal behavior, including expectations communicated by the caring adults in their lives.

According to *Teens Today*, young people who have open dialogue with their parents are more likely to report that their parents influence their decisions about sexual activity, and parents who convey expectations about sexual behavior (more than one in three do not) are more likely to have teens who try to meet them.

Understandably, these are tough conversations for many families to have. Here are some talking points for parents that may help get the ball rolling.

- Sometimes you can feel pressured to engage in sexual behavior you may not want.
- You're in charge of your body and what you choose to do with it.
- There is a lot at stake – a decision about sexual behavior can have lasting physical, social, and emotional consequences.
- What choices do you think are right for you?

Commenting on the prep school oral sex stories, a spokesperson said, "These incidents arise out of a climate and a culture that make kids think it's okay to do these things. As long as it's unrecognized by parents ... we're in it alone."

In truth, we're in it together. Adults who understand, acknowledge, and communicate with teens – even across gender lines – about the difficult decisions they face when it comes to sex can guide them toward healthy choices. And that's good news because, after all, hooking up may mean losing out.

*Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc., has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. SADD, with 435 chapters in Florida, sponsors school-based education and prevention programs nationwide and makes available at no charge the **SADD Contract for Life** and the **Opening Lifesaving Lines** brochure, both designed to facilitate effective parent-child communication. Toll-free: 877-SADD-INC. For more information on the **Teens Today** research, visit www.sadd.org.*