

Thunder Bay Teen Pregnancy Prevention Coalition

PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SEX EDUCATION OF THEIR CHILDREN

What has been Happening in the Thunder Bay District

In the fall of 2001, responding to concerns that rates of teen pregnancy in the Thunder Bay District were significantly higher than the provincial average, the Thunder Bay Teen Pregnancy Prevention Coalition released an in-depth examination of local adolescents' perspectives on the prevention of teen pregnancy in the district.

One of the major themes that emerged was the importance of communication between parents and their children. Teens reported that although they wanted to be able to have conversations with their parents about sex, they felt uncomfortable talking to their parents. They felt that this communication could be improved if parents would initiate conversations when their child was younger – long before puberty – and over a period of time. They indicated that the common parental strategy of having the “Big Talk” and never discussing it again was ineffective and did not promote a level of comfort that would encourage them to pursue further conversations with their parents.

Because of the well-documented importance of parents to their children's sexual education, and because local teens reported an unfulfilled need to talk about sex with their parents, the Coalition decided to explore parents' attitudes towards the sex education of their children. In March 2003, a district-wide survey was conducted to investigate parents' attitudes towards their children's sex education and to determine what strategies could be implemented to improve communication and sex education in the home.

Highlights of the Survey

Parents' sense of responsibility for sex education

- ❖ Most parents report that they received their sexual education as children from school and friends.
- ❖ 97% of parents agree that sex education is their primary responsibility.
- ❖ Only 12% of parents want their children to receive sex education the same way they did as children.

How do parents feel about discussing sex with their children?

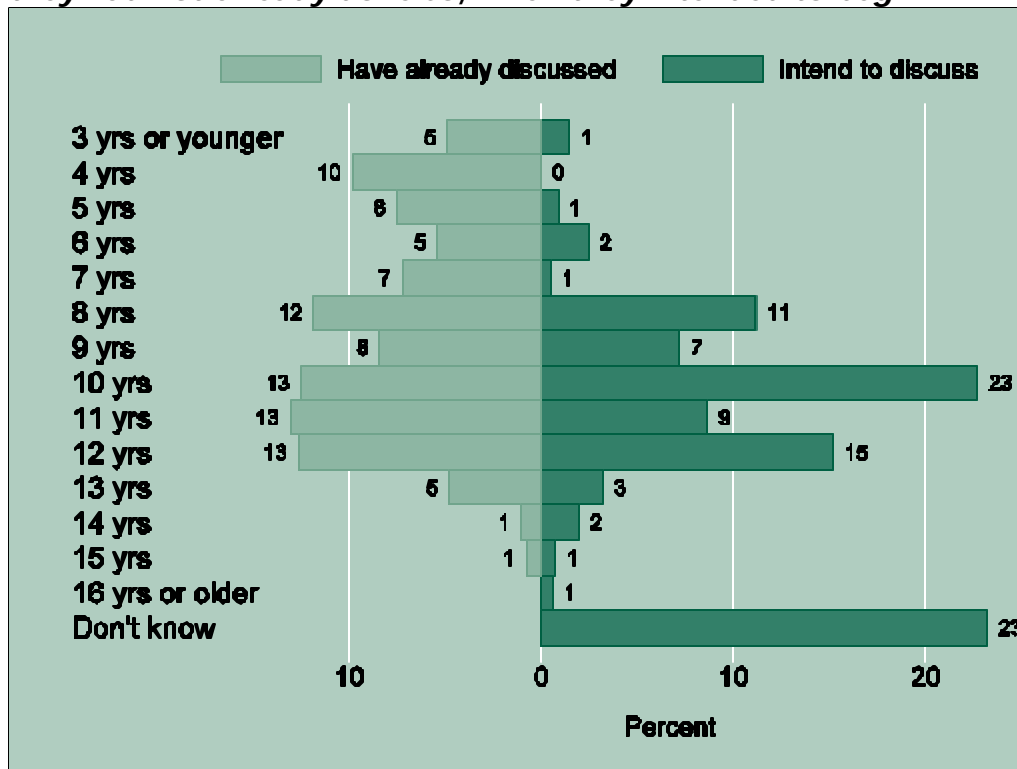
- ❖ Mothers are generally more comfortable discussing sex with both their sons and daughters; fathers are somewhat less comfortable discussing sex with their daughters.
- ❖ Parents express confidence in their ability to teach their children about sex.
- ❖ Mothers and fathers perceive the delivery of sex education differently. Most fathers believe that discussions are occurring with both parents, while mothers believe that they alone are providing sex education.

	Have already begun discussions on sex (n = 207)		Have not yet begun discussions on sex but intend to (n = 92)	
	Mother (%)	Father (%)	Mother (%)	Father (%)
Myself only	71	23	43	27
My partner only	1	8	0	3
Both myself and my partner	28	69	57	70
	p < 0.001		p = 0.27	

When and why do parents discuss sex with their children

- ❖ Almost two-thirds of parents of children aged 3 to 15 have already begun discussing sex with their children, while the rest express an intention to do so in the future.
- ❖ Although a minority of parents began sexual health discussions at an early age, most parents did not begin until puberty.
- ❖ Also, almost a quarter of those parents who had not yet begun sexual discussions, had no specific plans for when to begin.

Parents were asked at what age they began discussions on sex, or if they had not already done so, when they intended to begin.



- ❖ Parents who have already begun to discuss sex with their children did so, on average, at age eight and a half. Those who have not yet begun intended to begin at age eleven and a half, a difference of 3 years.
- ❖ Parents began to discuss sexual health for three main reasons:
 - parental judgment and feelings of responsibility
 - child's curiosity (mainly among younger children)
 - prepare children for the consequences of, and decision-making about, sexual activity (mainly among teen-agers)

What do parents talk to their children about?

- ❖ Parents were asked about thirteen topics, divided into four groups:
 - physical maturation (including puberty and menstruation)
 - emotional/social maturation (including emotions, relationships and sexual orientation)
 - sexual intercourse and associated risks (including sexual intercourse, AIDS/HIV, contraception, STDs and teenage pregnancy)
 - "taboo" topics (including abortion, oral sex, and masturbation).
- ❖ Of these topic groups, most parents indicated an intention to discuss physical, emotional, and social maturation, as well as sexual intercourse and associated risks. Many parents also indicate having fulfilled their intentions with more than half having introduced these topics by about age 10.
- ❖ Although most parents intend to discuss controversial subjects like abortion, masturbation, and oral sex with their children, very few had done so by age 15.

What resources would parents utilize to assist with sex education?

- ❖ When asked about what resources could be provided to assist parents, three quarters of the parents indicated books and videos as their first choice followed by pamphlets, T.V. shows and library kits.