Introduction to the 2007 Edition

From 1960 to 2000 the number of sexually transmitted disease in our children skyrocketed. I asked my colleagues in internal medicine, pediatrics, and family practice if they were aware of the numbers I showed them. They shook their heads. Sure, they believed the numbers, they said. But they just didn’t have the time or the energy to speak about them.

So I wrote this book to bring to parents and educators the information we must have to help our own kids negotiate a very toxic sexual culture. When the first edition of this book was printed in 2002, 15.3 million Americans contracted a sexually transmitted disease each year, and two-thirds of those infections occurred in teens. Since 2002, the number of cases of new sexually transmitted diseases has jumped by four million—and more than half (approximately 10 million) of these infections occur in teens.

Helping kids avoid sex when they are young is no longer a moral or religious issue; it is a medical one. If I didn’t believe that we can be effective in helping our kids delay their sexual debut, I would stay silent. But we can help. You can help. Who you are and what you say to the teen in your life can save his life.

This book is for you. Take what you learn and change the life of one teen you know.
Here are seven crucial ways to protect your kids from the deadly epidemic that has claimed far too many young lives already.

1. **Know the data.** Teens today face greater threats than we did, with the twin (and related) epidemics of sexually transmitted infections and depression. Know the facts to prevent your teen from becoming a victim.

2. **Get to know your teen’s friends.** The best way to find out what your teen is involved in is to ask what his friends are up to. You can bet that whatever your kids’ friends are doing, your own children are doing as well.

3. **Don’t just talk—listen.** If you really want to get closer to your kids and get them to open up, just gently ask questions and then listen without responding or interrupting.

4. **Engage, don’t bail.** Teens need—and want—parent involvement more than even toddlers do, even though they’ll likely deny it. Stay connected and stay present.

5. **Persevere and never take kids personally.** Never take juvenile hissy fits personally. Even if it seems you’re not making progress, keep at it. Persistent parenting pays off in the long run.

6. **Stick to your instincts.** Adults’ instincts are more mature than teen’s instincts. Seventeen-year-olds don’t have full cognitive development. She may not understand why she shouldn’t wear a tiny top that leaves nothing to the imagination, but you do.

7. **Let your kids know that you are not the enemy.** In the great culture war for our kids, you’re on the same team. The opposing team is not you and your spouse—it’s the toxic popular culture that markets sex to make money off kids.

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**The Epidemic Is Real**

Overall, 25% of teens—*one out of every four adolescents*—who are sexually active will contract a sexually transmitted disease (STD) today. Even more outrageous is the fact that although teenagers make up just 10% of the population, they incur 25% of these diseases.

While the statistics may shock you, they’ve become a part of daily life for me. Every day, one-third of the sexually active teenage patients I see have a sexually transmitted disease. Yes, I said one-third. It might be herpes, or human papilloma virus (HPV), or chlamydia. More rarely, I have to tell a kid still wearing braces he has HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

I and hundreds of doctors like me are on the front lines of this epidemic. We see precancerous conditions in girls as young as 14, infertility in girls barely old enough to get pregnant, babies infected with STDs their mothers didn’t know they had, and infants born with herpes-caused encephalitis infections, which cause massive brain swelling.

This is an epidemic, for sure, but it is a silent epidemic. For this epidemic, there is no public outrage, no television news magazine expose, no based-on-a-true-story movie about crusading advocates fighting this scourge, no Congressional hearings, and no Race for this Cure. And yet this epidemic is just as serious as any health emergency you can think of.

"If we fail to teach teens to postpone sex as long as possible, the price they may be their very lives.”
The Explosion from Two to Twenty-five

In 1960, physicians contended with two major sexual diseases: gonorrhea and syphilis. We thought of them as problems limited to sailors and prostitutes. No one talked about them. If you experienced some strange symptoms in, on, or near your reproductive organs, you sheepishly headed to your doctor for an injection of penicillin, then tried to forget the experience.

Today we’re faced with the ravages of far more than those two simple STDs: we’re battling scores of viruses and bacteria. With multiple strains of mutating viruses, and the emergence of some antibiotic-resistant bacteria, the actual number of true STDs we face may be as high as 35 to 40.

The biggest change we’ve seen in STDs in this century is the onslaught of viral infections. Sexually transmitted viral disease are the most frustrating for physicians because we don’t have medicines to kill the bugs. We can prescribe drugs to help control the symptoms of some viral STDs, but we can’t eliminate the infections from the body. Once you catch one of these nasty infections, it could be yours for life.

The Emotional STD

For the thousands of teens I’ve treated and counseled, one of the major causes of depression is sex. I consider it an STD with effects as devastating as—if not more—HPV, chlamydia or any other.

Teens are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of early sexual experience because of the intense and confusing array of emotions they’re already experiencing. Adding sex to the picture only makes those feelings more intense and more confusing.

✓ **Loss of self-respect.** While many teenage boys claim sex is fun, just as many admit (if given the opportunity) that they lose respect for themselves after a sexual encounter. Girls have the potential to feel an even greater loss of self-respect. Self-respect issues arise when a girl feels that she’s surrendered control of her body to her sexual partner. If her partner fails to receive what she gives with the respect and awe it deserves, she feels hurt, disappointed, embarrassed, and cheated. When she turns these feeling inward upon herself, the end result is depression.

✓ **Loss of virginity.** I believe that preserving our virginity is one part of what we are naturally conditioned to protect, because I have witnessed hundreds of teens grieve the loss of their virginity. Intuitively they know that their virginity is something special. It is private and it is deep.

✓ **Loss of trust.** They may begin sex because it is fun, but realize afterward that it involves much more serious feelings than they anticipated. For whenever teenagers expose private parts of themselves (emotionally or physically) during sex, they are exhibiting great trust in their partner. If this results in a pleasant experience, their trust grows, but if it ends badly, their trust is destroyed.

✓ **Loss of expectations.** I call it the result of smashed expectations. For quite often, teenagers build up the sexual experience in their minds, expecting it will fill their emptiness while meeting their needs for love and acceptance and belonging. For instance, teens often use sex as a way to fill the void of loneliness that results from a broken family. All too often, however, those expectations are never met, leaving teens with a grinding emptiness, resulting in frustration, agitation, and depression.
Birth Control is Not Disease Control

For the past 25 years or so, doctors like myself, public health officials, educators, and parents have been somewhat successful at reducing teen pregnancy and teen motherhood.

But in the midst of our “successes,” what has happened over that same time period to STDs among our teens? They have exploded into epidemic proportions. While we physicians handed out oral contraceptives, chlamydia rates rose. While we gave injections of Depo-Provera, the numbers of HPV rose. And while we handed out condoms to teens, we saw syphilis outbreaks and genital herpes climb.

And all of this creates a serious dilemma for doctors like myself.

Twenty years ago, I wouldn’t have hesitated to prescribe oral contraceptives to teenage girls. In fact, any form of birth control was fine with me, as long as the patient used it consistently. I was so focused on the pregnancy epidemic that I wrote hundreds of prescriptions for birth control pills and gave more injections of Depo-Provera than I care to remember.

But today, I think long and hard about prescribing birth control pills or Depo-Provera to kids because this puts them in such grave danger of contracting an STD. In giving a girl birth control that I know will protect her from pregnancy, am I inadvertently encouraging her to pick up a sexually transmitted disease?

And if you might ask, “What about condoms?” read on. We place far too much trust in those slim packets of latex and lambskin. In most cases, the chances of condoms preventing STDs is almost as thin as the condoms themselves. Hence, I think carefully about advising teens to use condoms, as well as other forms of birth control. The risks are just too high.

Media and the World Our Kids See

No discussion of teen sex would be complete without a detailed understanding of the impact of sexual messages (whether through words or visual imagery) on the tender adolescent psyche. And the impact is profound.

There are three primary lessons teenagers learn from the hundreds of thousands of sexual messages they’re exposed to:
1. Sex is BIG
2. Sexuality is the largest dimension of a person’s personality
3. Cool people are promiscuous

Can you imagine the public outrage of parents if movies, magazines, and music incorporated glamorous smoking imagery to the same degree they do sexual content? Or if advertisers used cigarettes to sell their jeans, shampoos, and soaps? Imagine this occurring in the midst of an epidemic of lung diseases among teens!

Well, this is exactly what is occurring with the sexual content in our media and our teens. Only instead of an epidemic of lung diseases, we have an epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases.

There are actions that you, as a parent or concerned adult, can take today. If Hollywood rates a movie PG-13, follow the rating to the letter. If the movie is rated R (requiring a parent or guardian if the child is under 17), make your 16-year-old wait.

Discussing with your teenager the sexual content of movies and the harm it can cause helps them realize you’re on their side. So ask your teenager what he thinks is appropriate in movies and why. Then ask what he thinks is bad and why. By questioning teens, we can help them come to conclusions on their own about what is acceptable and what is not.
Adolescent in Body and Mind

Adolescence is a time of tidal changes in the bodies of boys and girls. Hormones give them strange, new powerful feelings, and the people around them begin to treat them as young adults.

What can we do about it? For one thing, we can be there for our daughters. We can try to understand what they’re going through and give them whatever help they need to make their way through the minefield of experiencing childhood in an adultlike body. And we can simply remember who they are. However mature a young girl’s body may look, we need to remind ourselves that a child lives inside. Finally, we must be ready to intervene strongly if we discover our daughters are becoming sexual long before it’s appropriate. My personal experience has led me to believe that puberty can be harder for boys than for girls.

The pressures of coping with tremendous sexual urges, trying to appear manly among peers, and being hesitant to discuss their feelings about puberty can make teen boys incredibly vulnerable to having sex at a young age and with numerous partners. And both of these, in an age of an STD epidemic, spell disaster for our boys.

So here’s how we can help. First let your kids know that being a man is a good thing. It is not something that they need to be frightened about. Let your son know that he will be a man in his own unique way. He has the freedom to be different from any bad role models he has seen.

Let him know that you are his advocate in helping him define what being a man is all about for him and that you want to make sure the “real” him isn’t suffocated by messages about being male that he bumps into daily.

Connectedness

I have a deep belief that is based neither on psychological theory nor on studies, research, and experimental data, but rather on what my heart, my intuition, tells me. My belief is this: Relationships with other people are what make our lives worth living. I believe this is true for everyone, even teens, who may seem to reject the love we offer and confound us with their antisocial behaviors and rebelliousness. The fact is that when teens have close ties with family and friends, they are more productive, happier, and less likely to get into trouble. They develop a sense of belonging, of being part of a larger group, and feel an unspoken trust that the people who are important to them will always be there for them, no matter what the circumstance.

This unwavering sense of belonging and trust is the very substance of good relationships, and it is the strength that can keep them out of trouble or even save their lives. We have a word for it: connectedness.

If you want to develop connectedness with your teen, start by betting to know the world he lives in. Where he goes at night and who comes home with him after school.

It’s a tough line to walk because he may think you’re being suspicious of him rather than simply interested, but it’s a line we must walk.

Fortunately, we don’t have to feel completely lost on the journey. There is a road map. It leads us through four major landmarks: communication, intimacy love, and appreciation.

CONNECTING THROUGH COMMUNICATION.
It’s no secret that teens want to communicate. They talk on the phone endlessly, instant-message each other for hours, and spend entire days hanging out with peers. The trick is getting them to communicate with you.
It’s easier than you might think. Take the fundamental steps listed below, and you’ll be surprised at how quickly your teen will open up to you.

1. **Like Your Teenager.** If teenagers think you like them, they will communicate with you. If they think you dislike them, they will shut you out. It is imperative that you let your teen know that you like the person she is. This doesn’t mean you have to agree with everything she does or says. Teens can deal with your disapproval, so long as they know that you accept and love them despite their flaws.

2. **Listen to Your Teenager.** Once your adolescent is willing to stay in the room with you for longer than 15 seconds (because he knows you really want to be with him), the most important principle in communication is to listen. Listening is important for two reasons: It gets you out of your own world and into his so you can learn what he sees, feels, thinks, and worries about. And if you’re a good listener, over time your teenager will begin to listen to you because he feels important to you and liked by you.

**CONNECTING THROUGH INTIMACY.** Communication opens the door for relationships. Intimacy cements them together. Essentially, there are three types of intimacy—physical, emotional, and spiritual. We will examine the first two.

1. **The Magic Touch.** Touch lets teenagers know that someone sees them, someone likes them. So when a parent—still the most important person in a teen’s life—touches them, it affects them deeply. Through physical contact, teenagers also learn self-respect, appropriate touch, body boundaries, and modesty. Touch her shoulder or her hair. Do it quickly, gently, and repeatedly.

2. **Creating Emotional Intimacy.** The key to establishing emotional intimacy with your kids is creating an environment where they feel safe about expressing their feelings. So how do you create a safe space? By spending more time with your kids, for one thing. Teens need our presence. When we give our kids time, it powerfully communicates that we love them. In addition to time, you must provide a safe location for emotional intimacy, a place where your child feels comfortable expressing his thoughts and feelings without interruptions or eavesdropping. Maybe it’s his bedroom, or the family den, or the back porch. So long as your teen feels at ease, protected, and secure, anyplace will do.

**CONNECTING THROUGH LOVE.** Love is tough. It means sacrificing for our kids and loving them not because of what we can get from them—approval, fulfillment of dreams, feeling better about our parenting, whatever—but because those are the very things they need from us.

**CONNECTING THROUGH APPRECIATION.** We all need to feel valuable to the people we know and the world we live in, but teens, who naturally struggle with insecurity about their developing identities, feel this need even more keenly than other people do. Parents, especially, should do everything they can to help their adolescents feel valuable and valued. At issue isn’t what they’ve done; it’s who they are. If you praise your son’s great soccer abilities, also praise his patience. If your daughter is as compassionate or perceptive as she is bright, give her as much credit for the former qualities as for the latter.

For parents who care for their children and want to protect them, there is perhaps no better or stronger force at their disposal than connectedness.
Four Main Reasons Teenagers Have Sex

1. **For fun, excitement, and thrills; to seek out the unknown.** In this situation, most teens have very limited attachments to their sexual partners, viewing him or her as an object of play.

2. **To be accepted by peers and society at large.** We know that young teens typically have poor self-esteem, and that some teens opt for sex to bolster their sense of value.

3. **To have their needs met.** All teens are wired with needs for intimacy, love, and a sense of their own value. When these needs are not met in meaningful ways through relationships with family and loves ones, a teen may turn to sex to fill those voids.

4. **To lose themselves.** Some teens use sex like a drug to blot out pain or other uncomfortable feelings.

Holding Off

It’s true that studies have found that 40% of high school freshman are sexually active. But that means 60%, over half, have decided to wait. In fact, nearly the same number of tenth-graders, about half of eleventh-graders, and four in ten high school seniors remain virgins.

As it turns out, they’re holding off for a variety of reason. First, some teens are smart enough to be afraid of pregnancy or getting an STD. They should feel fearful about having sex at an early age because of pregnancy and STDs, but we should also teach them that it’s something very special, beautiful, and worth waiting for.

Not all teens postpone sexual activity out of fear. Some do because they simply don’t want the complications it brings into their lives. Many have told me that it makes relationships more serious, more committed, and they don’t feel ready to deal with those issues.

There is another group of teens who are holding off having sex. These are the kids who do so because they have high regard for it. They have developed a tremendous respect for their own bodies and feelings, neither of which they’re willing to share at random.

Sometimes I ask kids how they have come to feel this way. Almost universally, they tell me that their parents have taught them to respect themselves.

The problem is, most parents hate talking about sexual issues with their kids. They are embarrassed, insecure, and often just don’t know what to say.

When your child is younger and starting to ask questions about sex, give him simple, straightforward answers. As he grows older and begins to learn about sex at school, tell him that you want to help him understand everything that he is hearing and that you want to be his final information source. What he’s hearing is so important that you want to be sure he understands it. When he learns about STDs, ask him what he’s learned, just as you would ask what book he’s reading in English. The most important thing is to stay abreast of what your teen or young child is hearing at school so that you can reinforce the positives and let him know that sex is serious business.

I’ve seen teens who receive positive reinforcement about refraining from sex from their parents take the message and run with it. But I have also seen teens who receive ambivalent messages.
Ambivalent messages come from parents three ways:

1. **Silence.** This is the most common form of ambivalence I see, and I believe that it stems from a genuine lack of understanding on the parent’s part of the serious consequences of sex that our teens face. Parents simply let teens make decisions about sexual activity because they believe that nothing terribly bad will happen.

2. **Poor example.** Time and time again teens tell me that their single mother or father warns them that they shouldn’t be sexually active, but that same mother or father is living, unmarried, with a sexual partner—often one of a long line of partners. If a parent really wants his or her teen to stay away from sex, there are some serious decisions to make.

3. **Inconsistency.** Parents who warn their child that teen sex isn’t good but spend a lot of time watching highly sexualized television or movies are muddying the waters. If a kid sees his parent “approving” of sex between young sophisticated singles on television, why shouldn’t he be one of those young sophisticated singles?

We can start by setting clear, unambiguous standards for our children, in what we say and what we do. We are not shy about setting the bar high in other areas, such as education and taking drugs. We need the same attitude where sex is concerned.

Today’s teens live during a time when sex can be toxic and life threatening. They stand in the middle of an invisible battlefield surrounded by disease and depression, injury, and death.

Victories won’t come from wearing condoms or swallowing birth control pills, but from wisdom, maturity, and self-control. These are lessons that only we, the adults in their lives, can teach them, through the very connections and relationships we forge with them.