



Lower-Income Parents on Teaching and Talking with Children about Sexual Issues

- Results from a National Survey -

Each year three million teenagers contract a sexually transmitted disease (STD) and nearly a million teenage girls become pregnant. Teens in lower-income families are particularly at risk. Experts agree that in families where sexual issues are discussed, young people are at decreased risk.

The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS) commissioned Lake Snell Perry & Associates (LSPA) and the Public Interest Media Group (PIMG) to conduct a survey with lower-income parents of school age children regarding their views about what children should be taught about sex and sexuality at home and in the classroom. This national survey of 803 lower-income¹ parents and guardians of children ages 5 to 18 was conducted August 3 - 20, 2002.

Here are the main findings:

- ?? By a five to one margin (81% vs. 16%), these parents favor sex education programs that teach young people about all aspects of sex and sexuality – including how to use birth control to prevent unintended pregnancy and how to protect against STDs – over programs that focus solely on abstinence-until-marriage and the dangers of sex.
- ?? African American (85% vs. 13%), White (80% vs. 16%), and Hispanic (80% vs. 18%) parents all agree that a comprehensive approach is preferable to one that only instructs about the dangers of sex and the advisability of postponing sex until marriage.
- ?? Parents recognize the central role they play in teaching their children about sex and sexuality. There is near universal agreement that it is important for parents and their children to discuss not just the basic facts about reproduction, but also issues about relationships and becoming sexually active (96%), how to prevent pregnancy and HIV/AIDS and other STDs (99%), as well as abstinence and how to say no to sex (97%).

¹ Up to 250% of poverty.

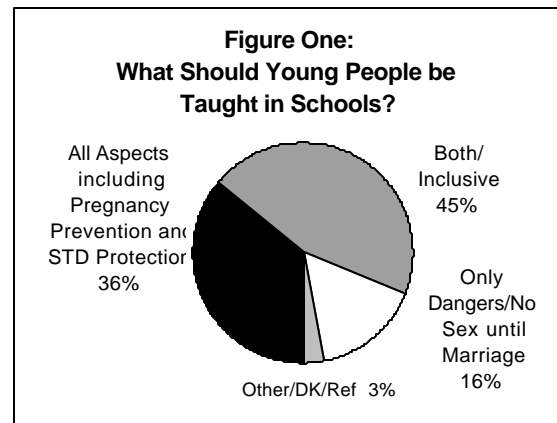
- ?? Despite acknowledging the importance of these issues, many parents have not discussed them with their child. Over four in 10 (43%) parents of 9 and 10 year olds have not discussed the basic facts about reproduction with their child. Even those with teenagers have not tackled some vital topics. Two in ten (20%) parents with 13 and 14 year olds and one in ten (11%) parents of kids age 15 to 18 admit they have not discussed issues about relationships and becoming sexually active with their child.
- ?? This is not an issue of being uncomfortable or unprepared, at least according to the majority of parents surveyed. Over eight in 10 (85%) say they are comfortable discussing sexual issues with their child, including six in ten (61%) who say they are very comfortable. A majority of parents (57%) say they have all the information and advice they need about how or when to raise sexual issues with their children.
- ?? One problem might be that parents simply do not know that there are resources available to help them. There are few sources parents say they rely on a lot, and substantial minorities say they have never gotten information or advice from such sources as books and magazines (31%) healthcare providers (38%) or other parents (42%). Parents also have limited trust in potential sources. Six in ten (59%) say they would trust doctors and nurses a lot, but far fewer say they have a lot of trust in parenting experts (30%), religious leaders (31%) or their child's school or teacher (21%).

Detailed findings follow.

Parents Say Young People Should Be Taught to Protect against STDs and Pregnancy

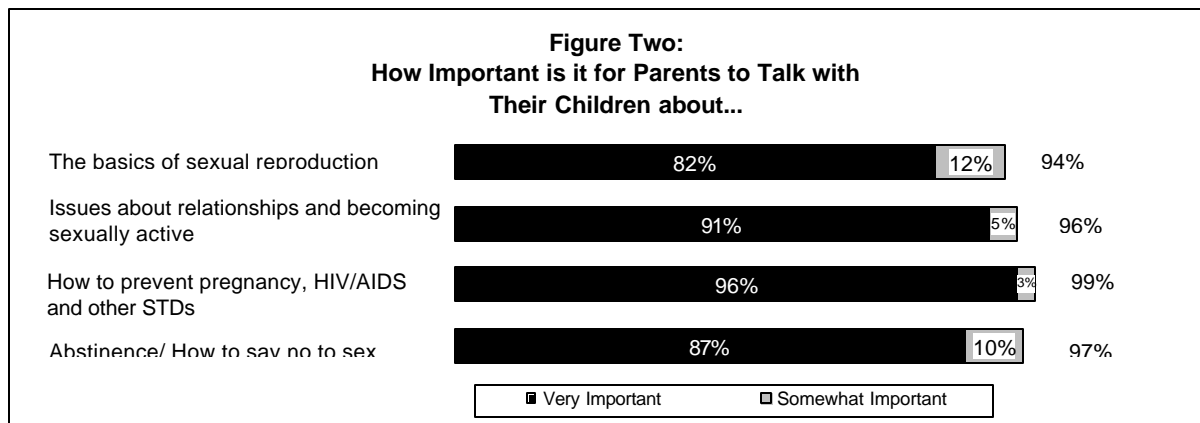
Lower-income parents were asked which of three options they think young people should be taught in schools about sex and sexuality. As Figure One shows, over a third (36%) believe young people should be taught about “*all aspects of sex and sexual health, including how to use birth control to prevent pregnancy and how to protect against HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.*” One in six (16%) feel they should be taught “*only about the dangers of sex and that they should not have sex before marriage.*” The plurality of parents (45%) prefer a more inclusive approach. They feel young people should be “*encouraged to delay sex and should also be taught about how to use birth control to prevent pregnancy, and how to protect against HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.*”

All told, by a five to one margin (81% vs. 16%), parents believe schools should teach young people about birth control, HIV/AIDS and other STD prevention, and to delay sexual activity, rather than focusing solely on the dangers of sex and postponing sex until marriage. Whites (80% vs. 16%), Hispanics (80% vs. 18%) and African Americans (85% vs. 13%) all prefer this comprehensive approach.



Respondents Believe Parents Should Talk with Their Children about Sexual Issues

These parents know they play a vital role in teaching their children about sex. As Figure Two shows, respondents agree with near unanimity that it is important for parents to talk to their children about a broad range of topics from the basics of reproduction to STD prevention. Echoing the feeling expressed above about tackling the full range of topics, participants say it is important for parents to talk with their children about how to prevent pregnancy and STDs like HIV/AIDS (99%) and about abstinence and how to say no to sex (97%).



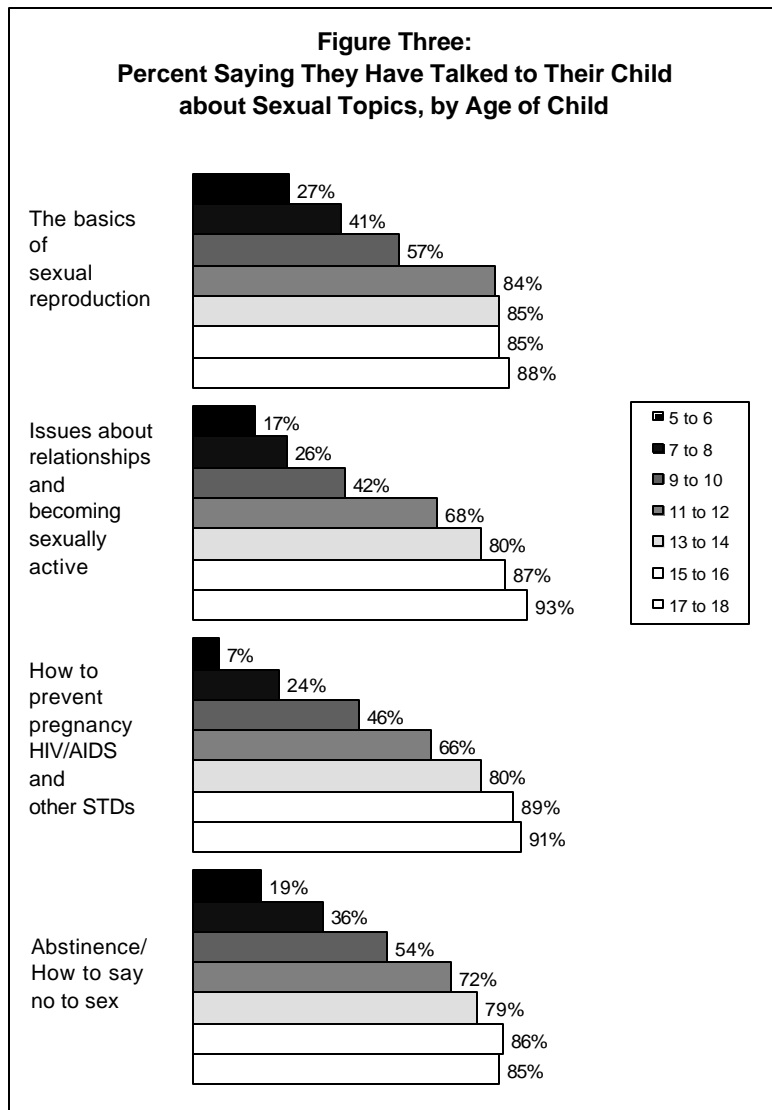
Many of These Parents Have Not Talked To Their Children About Vital Topics Such as How to Protect Themselves from HIV/AIDS

Parents were asked about whether they had discussed a list of topics with their child.² Despite near universal agreement that discussing these topics is critical, substantial minorities of parents admit they have not talked with their children about issues that, based on their ages, experts say, and data on teens sexual activity suggests, should have been addressed.

A quarter (27%) of parents of 5 and 6 year olds have talked with their child about the basics of reproduction; three quarters have not. Even among parents of 7 and 8, and 9 and 10 year olds many (59%, 43% respectively) admit they have not had this first vital conversation.

A third (32%) of parents of 11 and 12 year olds have not discussed relationships and becoming sexually active or how to protect themselves from pregnancy and STDs (34%).

Once their children hit their teens parents are more likely to discuss relevant sexual issues, but there are still substantial minorities who do not. Two in ten (20%) parents of 13 and 14 year olds, 13% of those with children age 15 and 16 and 7% of those with 17 and 18 year olds have not discussed becoming sexually active. Similar minorities have not talked about how to prevent pregnancy and protect against STDs.



One in seven (15%) parents with children age 15 and older say they have not discussed abstinence or how to say no to sex.

² In households with multiple children in the age range, one child was chosen at random. Child-specific questions were asked about that child.

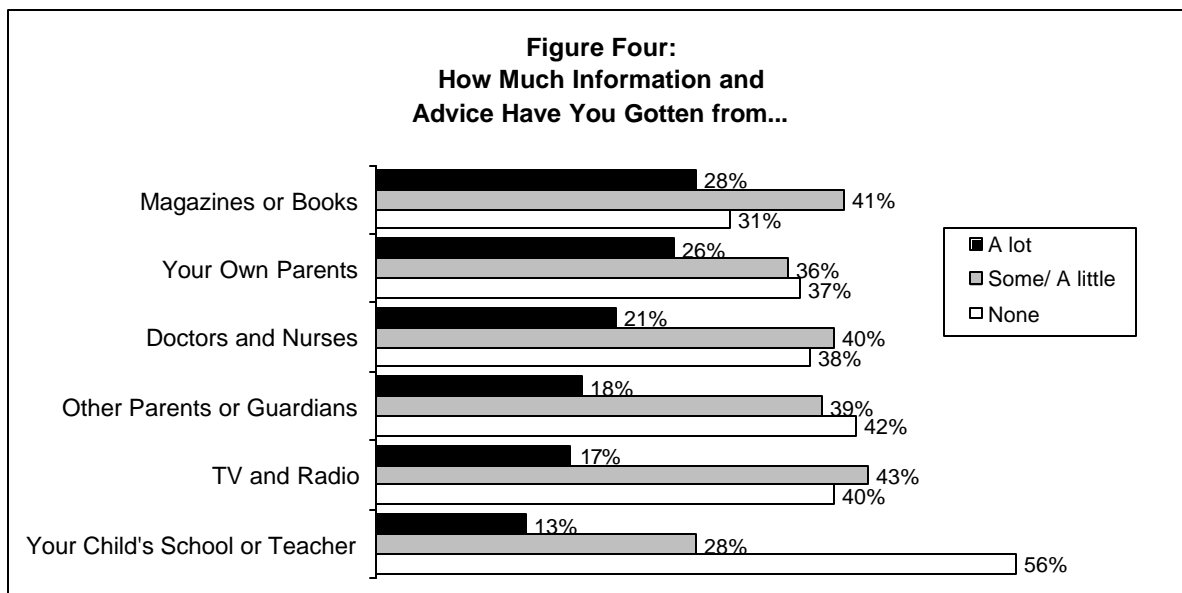
Most Feel Comfortable Talking with their Child about Sex, Over Half Feel Prepared

Most parents in the survey report high comfort levels in talking about with their children about sexual issues. Over eight in 10 (85%) say they are comfortable discussing sexual issues with their child, including six in ten (61%) who say they are very comfortable. Parents with children age 10 and under tend to be a little less at ease talking about sex with their children, but even among this group over half (55%) say they feel very comfortable.

While the majority (57%) of lower-income parents say they have all the information they need about when and how to talk with their child about sex, four in ten (41%) say it would be helpful to get more. Here again this differs depending on the age of the child; those with children 10 and under a more open to information and advice (48%) than those with 11 to 14 (40%) and 15 to 18 year olds (30%). Across all age groups, however, at least half of the parents feel they do not need advice in this area.

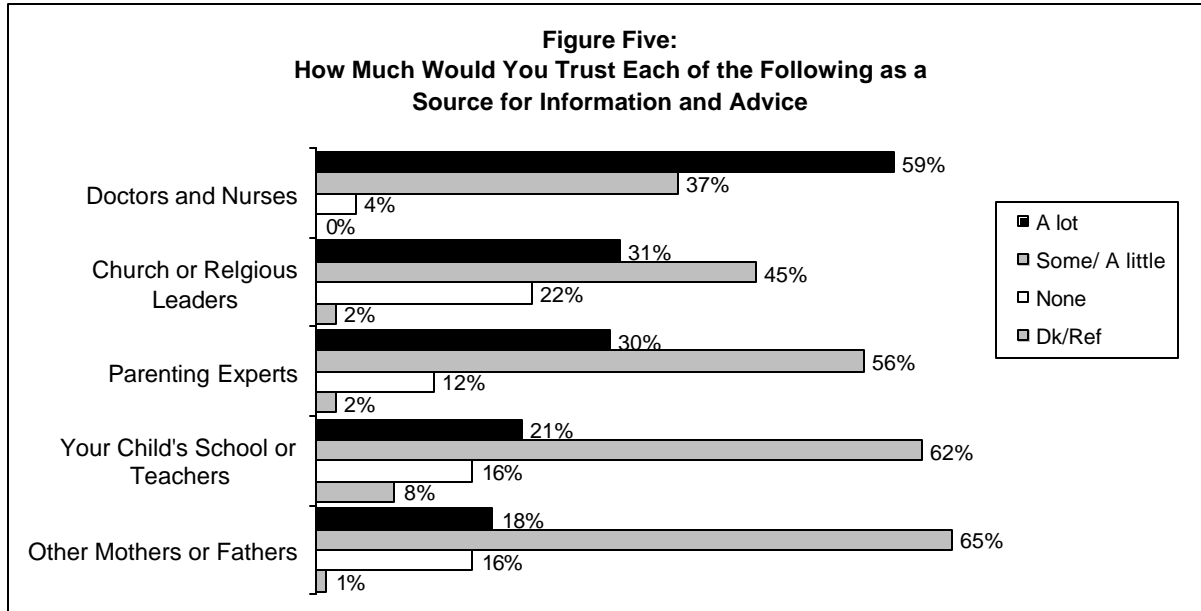
Parents Turn to a Variety of Sources, But Few Sources Are Relied on Heavily.

Parents in the survey were asked where they turn for information and advice about talking with their children about sex. As Figure Four shows, there is no single source a majority of parents say they rely on a lot. Moreover, substantial minorities say they have never gotten information or advice from a number of potentially helpful sources. Over half the parents (56%) have not gotten any advice or information from their child’s school or teacher. Four in ten say they have not gotten any guidance from doctors or nurses (38%) and three in ten (31%) say they have not turned to magazines or books. A lot of parents (42%) do not even turn to other parents for advice.



Parents are Unsure Who They Would Trust for Information and Advice

Parents also have limited trust in potential sources, as Figure Five illustrates. Six in ten (59%) say they would trust doctors and nurses a lot, but far fewer say they have a lot of trust in parenting experts (30%), religious leaders (31%) or their child’s school or teacher (21%). If they are not comfortable with these well-regarded sources, it is hard to say who they would trust on these issues.



Lake Snell Perry & Associates designed and administered this survey, which was conducted by telephone using professional interviewers. The survey was conducted August 3 - 20, 2002.

The survey reached a total of 803 adults in the U.S. with children age 5 to 18 whose household income is at or below 250% of poverty as determined respondent-reported household size and annual income. Hispanic and African American parents were over-sampled to allow for racial and ethnic comparisons. For results based on the whole survey population, the data were weighted by race and ethnicity to ensure an accurate reflection of the true population distribution of lower income families with school age children.

The sample was drawn using random digit dial (RDD) methodology. The sample was distributed geographically based on the expected distribution of lower-income families with children and minority families.

The margin of error for results based on the whole sample is plus or minus four percentage points.