

Sex and Your Teenager

A Parent's Guide

John Coleman

Trust for the Study of Adolescence, Brighton

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Sex and Your Teenager

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About the author



Dr John Coleman trained as a clinical psychologist at the Middlesex Hospital, London. He worked for 14 years as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychiatry at the Royal London Hospital. Since 1988 he has been the Director of the Trust for the Study of Adolescence, an independent research and training organisation based in Brighton. He has written widely on the subject of adolescence, including *Key Data on Adolescence* (2001) and *The Nature of Adolescence* (1999). In 2001 he was awarded the OBE for services to youth justice.



Foreword

When you talk to adults about the sex education they received, they will generally say that it was totally inadequate and that they want something better for their children. So it is not surprising that research shows that parents think that they should talk to their children about sex and relationships. In addition, contrary to common belief, children want this dialogue with their parent too. But even today, when there is so much discussion of sex around us, the reality of family communication rarely meets the aspirations of parents or children.

Sex and Your Teenager is a valuable tool to help fill this gap. It provides clear information and practical, down-to-earth advice to assist parents in supporting their children as they grow into adulthood. John Coleman's own commitment to improving the lives of young people and their families and his comprehensive expertise shine through his inspirational book. I am sure that any parent who reads it will find their knowledge increased and their confidence enhanced. As a result, they will find it easier to communicate with their children about

sex and relationships, to give them the understanding and confidence to establish fulfilling and rewarding relationships in the future.

Anne Weyman, OBE
Chief Executive
Family Planning Association



Introduction

This is a book for parents and all who care for young people. There are many books, pamphlets, leaflets and so on available for teenagers, but there are few books which are written for mothers and fathers, step-parents, foster parents and other carers. In the chapters that follow, I will cover some of the issues that I believe are of concern to adults. Sexuality is not an easy topic for parents and carers to deal with once their children enter adolescence. Everyone is aware of the need to discuss sex with a teenager. The only question is: How to start the conversation? The experience of this mother and daughter will be familiar to countless adults who have struggled with this problem:

And one day I remember I was walking along the track, and Mum says to me 'So you know how to do it now then?' So I said 'Well I knew already, like, you know, because I did.' Then she said 'You know properly now and all this lot.' And I was

getting really embarrassed and I was saying 'yeh', like this, and I was trying to get on to a different subject. And she was saying 'So you know how to make a baby and how to look after a baby' and all this rubbish. So I goes 'Yes, Mum' and I was trying to get off the subject all the time.

There is no doubt that the first and overwhelming obstacle is embarrassment. Many adults put this down to the poor sex education they themselves received. This may be a factor, but other things play their part. Sexuality causes all sorts of complex feelings within a family, and these feelings have the effect of creating taboos and inhibitions. We will be looking at some of these in the course of this book.

In addition to embarrassment, parents face other difficulties when it comes to dealing with teenage sexuality. Some feel inadequate – uncertain what to say or how to cope with conflicts over values and attitudes. Others find themselves getting anxious about what is going on in sex-education lessons at school, or the possibility of an unwanted pregnancy. Such worries may lead them to behave in a fussy or overprotective fashion. On top of all this, there are parents who feel quite simply out of their depth. The very idea of talking about sex and sexuality may be something which is quite foreign to them. They realise that their son or daughter is growing up, they know that parents ought to say something, but they are unable to do anything about it.

I hope that all parents and carers, whether shy or anxious, confident or embarrassed, will find something of value in this book.

Puberty

Puberty is the point in a young person's development when the body begins to change from that of a child to that of an adult. Puberty is not one single event, but many different events, and it takes place over quite a long period of time – usually about two years.

Of course, sexuality does not begin with puberty. There are many ways in which children make it clear that they are sexual beings. They are curious about their own bodies. They ask questions about their parents' bodies. They may masturbate, or find other ways of giving themselves bodily comfort or pleasure. They are aware of gender differences. All these are reflections of the fact that sexuality develops gradually from infancy onwards. When puberty arrives, your child will not be a complete stranger to thoughts and ideas of a sexual nature.

Puberty is, however, a critical moment in the overall process of growing up. It is during this stage that your child's body develops the characteristics of a sexually mature adult. In addition, a wide range of emotional and psychological changes begin to take place. All of these are