

Talking to teens about sex

By Ellie Hidalgo

Commit to telling teens the truth about sex and abstinence and they will have a better shot at making the right choices, said Pam Stenzel, a former counselor at a teen crisis pregnancy center.

"We're responsible to give a generation the truth," said Stenzel, who spoke at the recent Religious Education Congress to more than 500 parents and religious educators about talking to teens about sex. "Students need to hear this topic discussed from as many voices as they possibly can, over and over and over and over and over and over again."

The repetition, she said, will counter a media and secular culture that assumes teenagers and college students have to be sexually active, a culture in denial about the consequences of premarital sexual activity.

Stenzel said pregnant girls or teens with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) have told her they would have made different choices if they had known the risks and the consequences of being sexually active. There are, in fact, some 30 STDs teens can be exposed to (compared to five in 1950).

Other sobering statistics related by Stenzel:

---Teens have a four times greater risk of contracting an STD than of becoming pregnant.

---Every day in the U.S. some 12,000 teens get an STD (the most common: Bacterial Vaginosis, Chlamydia, Herpes, HPV, Gonorrhea, HIV/AIDS, Syphilis, Trichomoniasis).

---Many STDs do not have symptoms teens can feel or see, but they still can cause scarring in the uterus that leaves a girl sterile. Infertility among women has risen 500 percent in one decade in the U.S.

Among girls who graduated from high school in 1995, "many of them are just now finding out they will never have children because of the choices they made in high school or college," Stenzel added.

The American Medical Association now advises that every sexually active teenage girl be tested every six months.

"Our girls will pay a higher price than boys, physically, for these choices about sex," she said. "Of the 30 STDs, 26 of them damage women. The other four of them damage both. Are we telling our girls this?"

The number one STD, said Stenzel is the virus HPV. "It is highly contagious. All it takes is skin contact anywhere in the genital area, and you are infected for life. There is no condom in the world that will protect you from this virus."

HPV, she added, is the number one causal agent of cervical cancer in women. "More women died last year of cancer due to this STD than died of AIDS."

For this reason, she said, teens need to be told the medical definition of sex which is genital contact of any kind.

"Oral sex is sex. Every sexually transmitted disease can be transmitted through oral sex," she said. "And we need to be really clear that there can be no genital contact [to be able to say you are a virgin]."

Stenzel said she is angry when adults assume young people can't control their sexuality and are ruled by their hormones.

"You're better than that," she tells teens. "You can say yes. And you can say no. This is a choice. You choose."

She reminded parents that their job is not to prevent teens from having sex before marriage.

"I'm not the sex police. I can't go on their dates with them," said Stenzel, a Minnesota mother of three children, two of them teens. "I am responsible for one thing, and one only, and that is to tell the truth. What they do with the truth when they walk out is theirs. Place the responsibility for their choice directly where it belongs --- on them."

In the Stenzel household, however, there are rules about dating: no dates until age 16; date only in groups until graduation from high school. Stenzel also gets to know her children's boyfriend or girlfriend and their parents.

"All this is hard work, tough work," she said. "But it is for your child's protection. Let them roll their eyes all they want."

Last year, she added, statistics released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that there are more virgins in high school now than in the last 15 years. "Abstinence education, done correctly, does work," she said.

Following Stenzel's talk, youth minister Joann Maier of St. Anthony Church in San Jose told The Tidings she invited parents and teens to hear a Stenzel videotape and said it was a powerful learning experience for all.

Natalia Sandoval, a 17-year-old high school student from Sacred Heart Church in Lancaster said she was a virgin and "proud of it." Sandoval said she'd been hearing Stenzel's audio tapes since she was 12 and that knowing the consequences of premarital sexual activity helped her to remain abstinent.

"I like knowing the facts and not having people sugarcoat it," she said.

Editor's note: For information about Pam Stenzel's videos, audiocassettes, and books for use in homes, schools or parishes, see www.pamstenzel.com.