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The O/Seventeen Sex Survey

Oprah.com



Mothers and Daughters Talk About Sex

Are mothers and daughters really communicating? Openly? Honestly? Depends on who you ask. Liz Brody has the surprising, disturbing, instructive, and (in a way) encouraging results of our groundbreaking poll.

In the end, Denise Majka had to pickpocket her daughter's cell phone to get a straight answer. And it wasn't the one she wanted. The series of text messages couldn't have been more brazen:

R: *What do you want* / **A:** *I want you* / **R:** *What do you need* / **A:** *F***d*

"A"—Ariel, Denise's angel only child, barely 15—was having sex, and she'd probably started at 14. The mother and daughter had been alternately yelling at and avoiding each other for almost a year, ever since Ariel had started hanging out with the 17-year-old Denise called

"he who shall not be named." Ariel kept saying, "We're just friends." But now she was busted.

"The knot in your stomach actually drops to your feet, and it's a combination of rage, disappointment, and fear all at once," says Denise, 37, of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, who has waited tables, worked retail, clerked at a bank, and driven a forklift for a greenhouse, often pulling two jobs at once, to support her daughter. "It was a shock. I literally—I didn't—I just didn't know what to do."

Who does anymore, when kids are weaned on music-video porn and Miley Cyrus sirens, and going to high school means entering a hook-up, get-down world where the sex is "whatever" and the pleasure is usually his? Most of us bringing up daughters in these overheated times are left to muddle and misstep and—with luck—occasionally triumph by the seat of our wits. Which is why *O* teamed up with *Seventeen* for our first-ever Mother-Daughter Sex Talk survey. Together with the research firm Harris Interactive, we asked more than 1,000 15- to 22-year-olds and 1,000 mothers of girls those ages everything from how comfortable they've felt having "the conversation" to how risky teen sex really is.

The big news from the survey is the huge disconnect between what mothers are saying and what daughters are hearing. The data shows not only that there's a glaring discrepancy between the two sides' perceptions of how often they've had The Talk (by which we mean talking about having sex or making the decision to have sex) but that the moms may be overestimating how well these chats are going. Only 22 percent of mothers think their daughters are uncomfortable talking to them about sex, while 61 percent of girls say that, in fact, they are. This awkwardness may explain why the actual number of 15- to 18-year-olds in our survey having oral sex (30 percent) is double the number mothers know about, or even suspect—and why 46 percent of girls that age who've had intercourse didn't tell their moms. More disturbing is the prevalence of risky behavior that girls are trying to hide: Seventy-eight percent of surveyed girls who are no longer virgins say they've had sex without using a condom, and 65 percent of them admit they lied about or hid it from their mothers. Most troubling, a sobering 56 percent of girls who are no longer virgins have had sex without any form of birth control: Sixty-six percent of these girls have kept that a secret from Mom. Even among the few girls who had an abortion, many didn't tell.

"This is a difficult conversation, and our daughters don't make it easy for us," says Terri Apter, PhD, a University of Cambridge researcher and leading authority on mothers and teen girls, whose books on the subject include *Altered Loves* and *You Don't Really Know Me*. When we asked Apter to lend her expertise to our survey, she said, "Sex is complicated; it's a very powerful issue, and it's a very private one. But we have real reason to try to improve the conversation, because we do have strong evidence that some messages make a significant difference in how well daughters navigate sex." (Take Dr. Apter's test to find out how you're doing with The Talk.)



Time out. Let's stop right here and give ourselves some credit: Most of us grew up with mothers who avoided the topic of sex like the plague, and yet we're bravely forging ahead without a script. Even the late feminist leader Betty Friedan, never at a loss for words on women's reproductive freedom, fumbled when it came to having The Talk. As her daughter, Emily, remembers, "I was in high school when she tried to find out if I was having sex by awkwardly saying something like 'I know I've fought long and hard for a woman's right to have an abortion. But, um, I wouldn't want you to be in a position to need one.' I just told her, 'Don't worry, I'm not having sex' (I wasn't...yet) 'and I know everything I need to' (I didn't). And she said, 'Okay, good.' Conversation over."

Many mothers never even got that much of a speech. Janet Dzubow, 56, a former pharmaceutical researcher in Villanova, Pennsylvania, simply found sanitary napkins and a bra in her drawer one day. "I had to go ask my friends, 'What is this stuff?'" she says. "But I figured it out." Assuming her children would, too ("I'm not warm and fuzzy—I'm a scientist"), she hasn't once brought up the subject with her daughter Lynne, 19. "It would never even enter my mind," Janet says. "I trust her to go the right course and if she has problems or questions, to ask them." And Lynne, a freshman at Washington University in St. Louis, agrees that she would ask her mom. Lynne hasn't had sex yet—"I'm a little bit stunted in that area," she says with endearing candor—but when it happens, it will be with someone she's serious about, she says. "I was taught to be a strong, independent woman who doesn't need a boyfriend to define herself. And so I feel confident about what I want, and that includes what I want sexually."

If only all girls had such confidence and clearheadedness. But according to our survey, the Dzubows aren't typical. It's the girls who talk to their moms before their first time who are less likely to have regrets and risky sex. Also, girls who have The Talk are half as likely to get pregnant as those who don't. The communication factor seems to play out across the generations: Mothers who lost their virginity before ever having the sex conversation with their own moms were more likely to report their daughters having intercourse.

"Sometimes I feel a little awkward talking about sex with my patients—and I've certainly felt that way with my two daughters," says Emily Friedan, who is a pediatrician in Buffalo, New York, and a mother of three. "But I bulldoze my way through. And that's what I tell my patients' mothers to do. Pushing the discussion—which really should be a dialogue but usually isn't—shows daughters that they can come to you. And even an awkward discussion is, at the very least, an opening."

In hindsight, Denise Majka would have to agree with Friedan's advice. Her nightmare—the tensions, the screaming, the spells of incommunicado—started in September 2006, when Ariel entered high school. Just a few weeks into her freshman semester, Ariel says, she was painting scenery for a choir performance when a senior named Ray* wandered over and struck up a conversation. So what if he was three years older? He thought she was cute, and they became friends. Soon they started dating, and not long after that he said he loved her. It was a rush going out with an upperclassman—he even had a car. At first Ray took things slowly, but then he moved faster. And Ariel, a girl who, until then, had paid more attention to her studies and her quarter horse than to boys, now saw her grades slip; she started skipping school.

Denise was not born yesterday. "Do you have a boyfriend?" she'd ask.

"No."

But finally Ariel admitted she was seeing Ray—"which put me into overdrive," says Denise. The couple denied up and down that they were having sex, insisting they believed in abstinence, but Denise didn't believe them. Having lied herself at that age, she now got busy playing detective. She dragged Ariel to therapy. No progress. Meanwhile, Ariel would sneak over to Ray's house, where they'd mess around, and once they started going all the way, she let him sweet-talk her out of using birth control. She knew her mom had gotten pregnant with her at 19, and she'd swear to herself, and to Ray, that next time they'd use a condom...until the next time came and they didn't. Sometimes she felt a little scared; she was beginning to see in him a dark and aggressive bent. But she didn't tell her mom she was having sex—she couldn't, she says. "I was afraid she'd make me break up with him, and then I'd be afraid of his reaction."

As Denise watched Ariel's increasing involvement with Ray, she started bumping up against her own fears. Oh, she'd brought up the topic of sex, "but it was your basic 'I don't really want to talk about this' uncomfortable," she says. "It wasn't in-depth. And now I'm kicking myself for not being more straightforward. I was just so afraid—of, I don't know, teenage hormones, or that she'd end up pregnant, or worse, with some kind of disease—that it was holding me back."

Finding the text messages, however, finally jolted Denise out of her fears. Suddenly calm, she was able to take action. She gathered her family—her brother, sister-in-law, mother, and husband ("I call him Dad," says Ariel, who has seen her biological father only once). They gathered around and told Ariel they knew what she was up to; that she was too young for this kind of relationship; that they'd loved her first—for 15 years—and knew her best, way better than Ray. They also told her they were pulling her out of her school. She sat there stunned, taking it in. "I was really scared and angry at myself because I'd let it go so far," Ariel says. "But I was also kind of glad that they were intervening, so maybe I could finally get rid of Ray, because he was getting very possessive with me."

Since then Denise has been on guard. For a good year, she kept her daughter on a tight leash, always making sure someone—a grandma, aunt, or uncle—was with her, though lately she's trusted her enough to give her some slack. And Ariel, now 16, has focused on her classes, which she takes online at home. She has a new boyfriend, Ben, a shy, hardworking, loyal animal lover and they've been together for more than a year. Not only is she on the Pill; they also use condoms. "She's having sex, yes," Denise says, "but she's older now. And he's a good kid."

These days, after going through so much turmoil, she and Ariel are close again. "So now of course I probably talk to her too much," Denise says, laughing. "I'll go, 'Ariel, do you know what a BJ is?' Or we'll be watching a movie and I'll say, 'You know that's not really how it works, right? It's not all fireworks and people throwing back on the bed sweaty from a love session. I mean, it's not always that great.'"

"Mom," Ariel will say, "I got it."

So it's true that you need power tools to get through to the teenage brain—or at least it seems that way when you learn that only 4 percent of girls say their moms are the biggest influence on their attitudes toward sex. Actually, though, Terri Apter argues, one shouldn't take that 4 percent at face value. "Teens are so intent on developing this very exciting new self they feel emerging, it's almost with a kind of pride that they won't acknowledge the effect their mother has," she says. "Only later will they look back and see how their parents influenced them." And indeed, when asked another way—"How has talking to your mother affected your decisions about sex?" 60 percent of the girls said it *had* influenced them. "But," adds Apter, whose position at the University of Cambridge is the British equivalent of an American academic dean, "there's a truth here: It is very difficult to counteract the influences of peers and culture. So a lot of the sex talk challenge for a mother is asking, 'How can I increase my

impact?"

Melissa Milem, 27, a paralegal from Amesbury, Massachusetts, doesn't even know where to start. Whenever she goes near the topic of birds and bees, or boys, her daughter refuses to talk; nor have suggestions of seeing a counselor or communicating through letters helped. "Alyssa is 14. She's a freshman and she's beautiful, and her past three boyfriends have been 16 and 17," says Melissa, who has a 4-year-old daughter as well. "I'm pretty sure Alyssa has had sex. But when I try to talk to her about it, she wants no part of it. If we do talk about it, she'll say, 'How many times do I have to tell you, I'm not having sex with him?' I usually end up very frustrated because I want her to realize that life isn't all about boys. I want her to be a kid, find girlfriends, have fun—and I don't know how to get that into her head. We end up yelling at each other."

"We fight a lot," Alyssa agrees. "If she let me have more leeway to do the things I want to do, maybe I would have a better relationship with her and tell her more about what's going on in my life."

But Melissa doesn't dare. She can remember more vividly than most mothers what it's like to be 14, having got pregnant with Alyssa by her first boyfriend at age 12—an uneasy number to live with but one she handles gracefully. Now she struggles to keep her teenager—"still my baby"—from following in her footsteps.

"One day I came home early from work because I was sick, and caught Alyssa's boyfriend in the house after school. I broke down in tears. I said, 'I don't understand why you don't get this. It's not safe; you can't do this. You have to help me out here.' And she shut down. She was like, 'Eh, I'm not talking.' She went to her room."

In a situation like Melissa's, Apter says, trying to get control is probably futile. Instead, Apter suggests easing off ("Okay, you don't want to talk about it; I'll step back") but being honest ("I feel nervous, though; is there some conversation that you *are* comfortable with?"). Even just chatting about a romance—the daughter's or other people's—can be helpful. "At least if you're talking about how important it is to be treated with respect, to have a say in the relationship—that sort of thing seems to prevent unwanted pregnancy," Apter says.

But this is particularly difficult emotional terrain. Urging your daughter not to repeat your mistake—especially when that mistake resulted in her birth—is inevitably a mixed message. "There's a deep identification, daughter to mother. And the mother wants to be a role model," says Apter. Essentially, however, she's telling her girl: Do as I say, not as I do. And that's a tough message to take in. "She doesn't trust me," Alyssa says. "She thinks I'm going to make the same mistake she did. And she doesn't understand how I want to be my own person."

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Twelve percent of mothers first discussed sex by having a specially planned talk. But for girls who still haven't had the conversation, only 1 percent thought that would be a good idea—they would much prefer a casual chat when the subject comes up naturally.



The survey offers a few clues to improving the way we connect with our daughters. Clearly, delivering The Talk like a State of the Union address isn't the best way to go. "Working from a prepared speech can make a girl cut out," Apter says. So can speaking in a lecturing tone, which we often don't realize we're doing. "And they'll often talk a lot more if you don't look them in the face," says Hazle Cain-Johnson, a special-education teacher at Osceola High School in Wisconsin. "When you're riding in the car, playing video games, or cooking together—these are all good times to kind of chat about sex." Also, *what* you talk about is as crucial as *how* you talk. The survey showed that 73 percent of moms who have The Talk pass along the message "A guy will tell you anything to get you into bed; it doesn't mean he

likes you or will be faithful to you." But only 17 percent of girls who got that warning consider it important to their beliefs about sex: They considered positive advice like "You should be in a serious relationship before having sex" (36 percent) and "Sex is better if you're in love" (32 percent) more valuable.

In the survey, 17 percent of girls admitted they'd had sex—or wanted to have it—"just to get it over with."

Peer pressure is definitely a force to be reckoned with. "I've interviewed young people who spoke of 'getting rid' of their virginity so that they wouldn't be known that way—the implication being that virginity is rare in high school, which it's not," says Kathleen A. Bogle, PhD, assistant professor of sociology and criminal justice at La Salle University in Philadelphia, and author of *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus*. Kids, Bogle argues, have distorted assumptions about what is sexually normal, thanks to the media and gossip. The truth, according to 2007 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is that 54 percent of female high school students have *not* had intercourse. In our survey, only 27 percent of the 15- to 18-year-olds said they'd had sex. Either way, "most girls" are not doing it. "I'd try to give my daughter the real data," Bogle says. "And if she tells you, 'Yeah, but it's different in my school,' you can see if her particular school collects data. Some do. Or check if there are local statistics for your city or state. Kids are very interested."

Forty-eight percent of mothers who have shared their own sexual experiences with their daughters say they did so hoping that the girls would learn from their mistakes.

"I want to get a tattoo, Mommy—my Pisces symbol."

"You don't need a Pisces symbol."

"I want—"

"You don't want a tattoo on your skin, I'm telling you."

"I'll put it where it won't be a problem."

"Don't come here with a tattoo. I'm going to be very, very furious—I'm serious."

Sukanya Wilmot's impossibly willowy body is a big topic of conversation in her one-story Brooklyn home—how she's going to model with it, where she can and can't poke it, pierce it, or ink it, whom she can share it with. At 19, Sukanya is young enough to stash pink teddy bears by her pillow but old enough to keep secrets with her boyfriend. The gauzy canopy on her four-poster bed is a halfhearted bid for privacy, not only from her 13-year-old brother, whose unmade sleeping rig is inches away, but from the eyes in the back of her mother's head. "If I'm on the computer," says Sukanya, "she'll come behind me and watch me. And I'm like, 'Come *on*, you're always *on* me. Back up.' And then she'll be like, 'Okay, I see I'm not wanted here.' And she'll take her little sad self to her bedroom—but that's after she's already scoped out everything."

Nadine Beckford, 37, the offending mother, is on a mission. How many times she's told Sukanya, "I've already made the mistakes for you," she doesn't know. But the 52 cosmetologist, whose personality roars up like a Harley, will not stand by to see her daughter trip up. She has her reasons, and when she explains them, her voice suddenly goes quiet, as if she'd just cut the motor on that bike.

Raised in Jamaica by her grandmother while her mother lived on the other side of town with a new family, Nadine grew up without any guidance on boys or birth control. "I was a great girl, doing really well in school, so when I got pregnant at 18, I felt like everyone was a little disappointed," she says. "My grandmother left for England. She couldn't take it. There was nobody to ask me what I was up to, or to be vigilant with me. My mom didn't care."

So, ever since Sukanya was 11, Nadine has been parceling out information like a political campaign strategist

—"Here's what menstruation is"... "This is what happens when boys like girls"... "I'll let you know when you're ready for a boyfriend." "I come around in little ways," she says. "And it's easy."

"Easy for her. Weird for me," Sukanya says, rolling her eyes.

Nadine doesn't care if she frustrates her daughter. She openly patrols her life like a forensic scientist, clicking through the photos on her digital camera to see where she's been, nosing around her MySpace page, watching her body language for any signs of hormonally driven trouble. "I remember telling her," says Nadine, "Whenever you're ready, let me know. I want to be the one to protect you."

Sukanya, however, wasn't so sure about that: This past year, when she started having sex with her boyfriend and her mother became suspicious—"something was itching at me," Nadine says; "I sensed it"—Sukanya denied it. "I wanted to say yes," she says. "But I was scared."

A mother's most likely reactions to learning that her daughter has had sex are "disappointed" and "sad"; 15 percent feel "I didn't do a good enough job raising her." Twelve percent feel angry, and 12 percent feel old. Seven percent are happy. One percent are proud.



As Apter points out, a girl's loss of virginity often comes too soon, from her mother's point of view. "And the mother is usually right that the daughter doesn't realize what the emotional risks are," she says. "But when a mother is displeased at hearing the news, she shouldn't start closing off the relationship. A daughter's first sexual experience isn't her last. There's still a lot to talk about."

Nadine ended up cornering Sukanya and her boyfriend. She didn't beat around the bush, and they readily confessed. "I wasn't ready for her to be ready," says Nadine. "I thought she would hang on a little bit more, and I withdrew a little. But I got over it." Sukanya gives Nadine credit for being a "strict, but cool" mom, clearly sharing a fierce bond

with her. "I do see where she's coming from," Sukanya says. "She'll warn me about something and, even though I may not pay attention at the time, then it happens and I think, 'Oh, okay. I learned from that.'"

Now between the two of them, no private part is off-limits. They talk about the Pill (Nadine votes yes because condoms break, but Sukanya is worried about gaining weight—and what that would do to her modeling career). About oral sex. About Nadine's own romantic life, which generally provokes a "Come on, you're my mother!"—a sentiment shared by many girls in our survey. (When those who'd had The Talk were asked if they'd be more comfortable if their mother shared information about her first time, 26 percent said yes, 55 percent said no, and 16 percent said they'd already discussed it.)

Earlier this year, sitting side by side on the couch, both in tight jeans and bare feet, Nadine turned toward Sukanya and asked, "Do you enjoy it? Because I remember when I first did it, I'm like, 'What the hell? Is *this* what everybody's going crazy about?'"

"Oh my God," Sukanya said, as in, *You're really pushing it, Mommy.*

"Do you?"

Embarrassed pause, and then in a very small voice: "The first time, of course not, but yeah, it's cool."

"Do you look forward to it?"

"Well," Sukanya said, suddenly coy, regaining her footing, "if I get in the mood."

In discussing sex, 75 percent of mothers have talked about abstinence with their daughters. Only 35 percent have brought up pleasure.

As natural as it is to focus on the "don'ts" and the dangers of becoming sexually active, one of the most powerful messages a mother can give her daughter is that she should enjoy herself. Research published in *The Journal of Sex Research* has, like Apter's findings, shown that girls who understand the importance of their own pleasure are more likely to plan ahead and use birth control; those who don't, often lose their virginity on someone else's terms, seeing sexual activity as initiated by a partner's desire. Also, in our survey, girls whose mothers talked with them about the pleasure factor were more likely than those whose moms didn't to have positive attitudes about sex, feeling that it's normal, natural, and fun.

Annie Selke, 46, is one of those mothers. Last year she told her 16-year-old daughter, Charlotte, that she would help her get birth control if, and only if, she'd had an orgasm first: Sex, she'd insisted many times, should be about Charlotte's enjoyment. And Charlotte (who is still a virgin but hardly in the dark) read her loud and clear. "That's definitely what I got from her," she says. "My mom keeps telling me, 'All I care about is that you make sure you're happy about it.' And I am."

The conversation didn't happen easily for Annie, a New Englander who lives in the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts and runs two home furnishing companies. Her own mother had studiously avoided the topic of sex, except for one note of caution: "The girls I knew who got knocked up were drunk." So about a year ago, when Charlotte—who goes to boarding school and who has always told her mom everything—started including stories of kids she knew sexting their BFs (sending sexual text messages, often photos, to their boyfriends, Annie learned) and giving blow jobs at parties, Annie says, "I would feel like, 'Uh oh, okay. Not quite equipped to deal with this.'"

But deal she did.

Twenty-six percent of girls say having The Talk with their mothers has made them practice (or plan to practice) safe sex. Twenty-six percent said it made them wait (or plan to wait) longer to have it. And 18 percent said it made them use (or plan to use) hormonal birth control.

The most encouraging news from our survey is that having the conversation with your daughter really does result in her feeling more confident and making better, safer decisions when it comes to sex. As Charlotte continued to test the waters with her mother by talking about sex in the context of other people, Annie was able to act as a sounding board, and to show her daughter where she stood: "I just want it always to be on your terms, *on your terms*," she'd tell Charlotte. "If you're in the driver's seat—if you know what you're in it for—fine. If you don't, you're just going to end up feeling bad about yourself." The first time they talked, says Charlotte, it was a huge relief. She hadn't known how her mom would feel about her being sexual; mothers of her friends "weren't nice," as she puts it. "My mom really wasn't telling me not to do it—she was just saying, 'Think about it a lot first.' And that I could always come to her for birth control and she wouldn't judge me, and that everything would be fine." From that opening, Charlotte began to slip into their chats some of what she was thinking about, and doing, with her own boyfriends.

And then, this past fall, when Annie took her daughter for her back-to-school physical it suddenly occurred to her to ask, "Honey, would you like to go by yourself this time? Maybe you want to talk about birth control or something?" They sat in the waiting room, staring at the fish tank.

"I was just trying to put it out there, hoping there was no response," Annie remembers. "So she said, 'Yeah, I'd like to go by myself.' I was like, 'Oh, okay. I can look at the fish.'" About a half hour went by, and then the nurse

practitioner called Annie in to tell her that Charlotte was interested in contraception. Annie felt a thud, reminded herself that she was the one who'd brought up the whole thing, and soldiered on. They would have to make another appointment, the nurse told them, to determine what kind of pills, shot, or patch to get.

It was a month or so later, when Charlotte asked her mom to make the appointment, that Annie said, "Okay, as soon as you know what an orgasm is, then I feel you have your license to drive."

"Well...", Charlotte answered, "I've already had one."

"Oh," Annie said. *Cough, cough, cough.* "That's wonderful." She promised to make the call.

As Charlotte waits for her appointment, she's anything but rash. She and her boyfriend, whom Annie has met and likes a lot—"I mean, based on the seven words he uttered"—have talked quite a bit about losing their virginity. "I'm kind of nervous because it's a big deal," Charlotte says. "But he's someone I feel comfortable with, and I would never do it if I didn't have birth control."

She continues to share her love life with her mother, sans the gritty details ("She doesn't need to know all that"), and Annie is still working on her comfort zone. Recently, during a school break, they were having one of their chats in the bathroom—a soothing space awash in ivories and greens, complete with a fireplace, artwork, and upholstered chairs—while Annie soaked in the tub. Something Charlotte told her—Annie can't remember what—caught her so off guard that she literally dunked for cover. "I just needed a moment under the water to gather my thoughts," she explains. "And then I came up and Charlotte seemed sad. I said, 'What's wrong, honey?' She said, 'I feel like you're judging me.' I said, 'I'm not judging you. I just never talked to my mother about this kind of thing. It's as new for me as it is for you in a way. I know that by the time you have a kid, if you have a kid, you're going to have done all kinds of things with people. So I'm just acknowledging that, and wanting—as I've said so many times—it to always be on your terms.'"

Annie's words capture what a survey never could. Every mother of an adolescent goes through a wrenching push-and-pull as she tries to both protect and let go of a child she loves beyond measure. How a mother knows when to trust this young creature to make the right decisions as she shares her body with another—*that* comes down to instinct, not numbers. But what our survey can, and does, assure us is that talking about sex with our daughters—no matter how awkward or embarrassing, no matter if we're met with utter adolescent disdain—is worth the effort.

For Charlotte, it's been easy to decide to use birth control, because her mother is supportive and accessible. "I was very comfortable asking her about it because she had talked to me so many times," she says. And Annie has to hand it to her child for leading the two of them so intelligently. "I hope she has a really rewarding, rollicking sex life. Whether she'll tell me about it going forward, who knows? But I think she's off to a good start."