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New book helps parents talk with kids about sex

“Mom, you won’t believe this!” Melanie said, bursting into the kitchen one afternoon. The 17-year-old was about to announce that girls and boys at her high school were caught having oral sex. “They’re only 13 years old,” Melanie said. “And they’ve done it before!”

What Melanie described isn’t a random event. Recent reports indicate that casual sexual encounters, including oral sex, are common among teens nationwide. Sixty percent of teens surveyed in one study admitted to having sex with a partner who was just a casual friend.

Parents are struggling with how to respond. They’re searching for the words to talk with their kids about sex and relationships. As Gail, the mother of a teen says, “There are boundaries with your kids you sometimes don’t know how to approach.”

Words Can Work: When Talking With Kids About Sexual Health, is a new book for parents and other caregivers. It offers the information – and the words – they need to begin these sensitive conversations about sex. Parents describe discussions with their teenagers about puberty, values, postponing sex, birth control, oral sex, and more. Teens give their perspective on pressures they face. Experts offer strategies parents can use to teach their kids to make smart decisions about sex.

David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., former U.S. Surgeon General, is one of the featured experts. Dr. Satcher says parents must be proactive. “It’s really important that parents be well informed so they can teach their children.”

Author Jeanne Blake is an affiliated faculty member at the Division on Addictions of Harvard Medical School. She is president of Blake Works, Inc., which produces multimedia about challenges young people face growing up.

Blake reported on more than 500 stories about HIV as a medical reporter for Boston’s CBS affiliate WBZ-TV during the 1980s. “Teens living with HIV told me that, if they’d been able to talk more honestly with their parents, they may have made different choices about sex,” Blake says. “Research from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has proven that kids who can talk with their parents *do* tend to grow up more safely.”

In parenting seminars Blake hears a recurring theme nationwide. “Parents *want* to talk with their kids,” Blake says, “but they need help getting started. Again and again they’ve said, ‘Just give me the words!’ ”

Effective family communication requires listening as much as talking. Dr. Paula Rauch, also featured in this *Words Can Work* book, explains how Melanie’s mom could have responded to the news about kids and oral sex. “She could have said: ‘I wonder why the girls did perform oral sex?’ Or ‘Do you think oral sex is sex?’ Questions like these help young people consider how they’d handle situations themselves.”

Dr. Satcher reminds parents there’s no substitute for spending time with their children. “TV isn’t a substitute. The computer isn’t a substitute,” he says. “Time together gives children the chance to open up and talk about difficult issues. Listening builds their self-esteem.”

One teen who has decided to wait until she’s married to have sex agrees that parents need to listen more. “Talking about sexuality has to be a two-way dialogue,” she says, “or it will be a one time talk.”

Words Can Work: When Talking With Kids About Sexual Health is available only at www.wordscanwork.com. The Web site also offers interactive columns and Blake’s award-winning DVDs/videos about sexual health, bullying, underage drinking, eating disorders, HIV and self-esteem.