

*The Dallas Morning News*  
May 11, 1997  
Article by Kelly Ryan

# Youths and sex, frankly speaking

Discussion without embarrassment called key to handling teen concerns

BEDFORD - Eric Tooley wants kids to talk about sex. He hopes parents will talk about sex, too.

But the key, he said, is for families to discuss the subject together - openly and without embarrassment.

Mr. Tooley, director of resource development for Plano-based Aim for Success, brought the nonprofit organization's message about how parents can talk to their kids about sex to the Spring Garden Elementary School on Thursday.

"Your kids at some time will come up to you and ask you, 'What is sex?'" Mr. Tooley told the 20 parents who were in attendance. "They will probably ask you that in front of other people.

"And you're going to break into a sweat," he added, with a knowing chuckle.

But parents shouldn't react with surprise or astonishment, Mr. Tooley said. Instead, he advised them to practice just the opposite approach.

He said parents first should ask the child what made him or her ask such a question. That way, parents will know how much information the child needs to receive at that time.

"Your goal," he told them, "is to give them information before they need it."

The evening's discussion, which was presented for parents by the Spring Garden PTA, included tips on how parents can teach their children about sexual abstinence, self-control and sexually transmitted diseases.

He also told them that most teens, despite popular belief, are not having sex. According to an Aim for Success survey of nearly 50,000 students, 89 percent who were 14 and younger said they had not had sex, and 57 percent of those 15 and older said they had never had sex.

The majority of those in attendance Thursday were parents of first- and second-graders. But Mr. Tooley said it's never too early to start talking to kids about sex.

"In our society, the only people not talking about sex is us," he said, adding that sex saturates many movies, TV programs, magazines and even billboards.



Sometimes, parents said, it's difficult to talk with their children about sex because of their maturity level.

Bedford resident Liz Kennedy said her eldest child, who is 10, even had a difficult time giving her the flier announcing the Aim for Success meeting.

"She saw the word 'sex' on it and said, 'Oh, mom, that's nasty,'" Ms. Kennedy said.

Ms. Kennedy said she plans to use some of the tips Mr. Tooley outlined Thursday, instead of teaching her children about sex the way her mom taught her when she was a youngster.

"My mom just gave me a book about it," she said.

Mr. Tooley said it's important for parents to pick up on small clues in everyday life that might lead to a discussion - however brief - about sex.

He suggested sitting down with youngsters who are about to start dating and talking about what they should expect. He said that's the perfect opportunity to tell children about the values a family cherishes and the importance of abstinence outside of marriage.

"Sneak up with your kids on the subject. Find those opportunities," he said.

But try to keep the subject of sex light-hearted, Mr. Tooley advised.

"We don't want it to be so heavy that they don't want to ever talk about it," he said.

Linda DeLee of Colleyville said she felt good knowing it's OK to talk with her child about sex in a light-hearted way.

"That's not how we were taught when I was growing up," she said. "It was not in the open."

Kim Nix, the Spring Garden counselor who arranged the program, said she wants eventually to have Aim for Success present a similar program for fifth- and sixth-graders at the school. But for now, she was happy to present it for parents, she said.

"This is a topic that is uncomfortable for parents to talk about," she said. "But I believe that it does have to start at home."

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