

About last night

Maureen Matthews

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SAGE

Sex columnist Maureen Matthews answers your questions about sex, intimacy and relationships.

Q I recently caught my 15-year-old son with a girl. They weren't having sex, but they were well on the way. I'm a single mother and he has no "father figure" in his life who can talk to him about "the birds and the bees". I have always made myself available, and asked if he wanted to talk about it, but maybe I should have actually sat him down to talk about sex. How would I now go about this without the conversation turning awkward? I feel like he has been keeping secrets from me because I wasn't even aware he had a girlfriend.

A Ideally, sex education occurs naturally throughout childhood. Questions are answered as they arise, in an age-appropriate way. Books such as the **Family Planning Queensland's** Everyone's Got a Bottom, Peter Mayle's Where did I Come From? and What's Happening to Me?, and Babette Cole's Mummy Laid an Egg and Hair in Funny Places can help parents along the way.

In Australia, the average age at which children become sexually active is 14-and-a-half, so your son's behaviour is normal. For his protection he needs to have a talk with someone about safe-sex issues. Significant males in a boy's life are not always his father or the mother's partner. Is there a trusted uncle, family friend, teacher or sports coach who could chat with him?

If not, don't beat yourself up. Choose an appropriate time to bring this up. Australian psychologist Dr Janet Hall (drjanethall.com.au) jokingly suggests that "the parent brings it up when they are in the car on the freeway so the youth can't jump out".

She's also written a useful book to help. Sex Wise: What Every Young Person and Parent Should Know About Sex does the hard work for all and can save you both some embarrassment.

Many young people get their information on the internet. Have a look at Family Planning Victoria's excellent page on betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Sex_education_talking_to_teenagers?. Another site is Sex etc (sexetc.org), where teens give other teens advice. Having provided your son with some resources, tell him that you are always happy to talk to him. If you can do this in a casual, relaxed way he will see that you are not over-anxious or uptight about this, and will feel more comfortable talking about it.

It is no reflection on you that you didn't know that your son had a girlfriend. Many teens are shy about sharing this information initially. Part of becoming an adult is developing a private life. Teens want to feel that their privacy is being respected, so try not to grill him. Make sure that he has all the information he needs to avoid unwanted pregnancy or disease. Try to stay relaxed when the subject arises so that he doesn't get embarrassed and avoid you. Keep open the lines of communication between you and your son - and his girlfriend. All you can do is to equip him with knowledge, and be there for him.

WRITE TO OUR SEX COLUMNIST

Maureen Matthews runs Bliss4Women, a female-friendly erotica store, and regularly speaks on sexuality issues.

Send your questions to asklastnight@gmail.com