

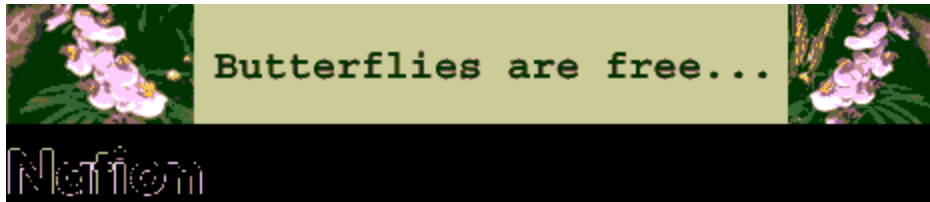


- Home
- News
- Main Categories**
- [Top News](#)
- [Nation](#)
- [States](#)
- [Washington/Politics](#)
- [World](#)
- [Editorial/Opinion](#)
- [Health & Science](#)
- [Census](#)
- [Offbeat](#)
- More News**
- [Columnists](#)
- [Lotteries](#)
- [City Guides](#)
- [Government Guide](#)
- [Talk Today](#)
- Money
- Sports
- Life
- Tech
- Weather

Search

Site  Web

By LYCOS



▪ [E-mail this story](#) ▪ [Subscribe to the newspaper](#) ▪ [Sign-up for e-mail news](#)

03/14/2002 - Updated 11:56 PM ET

## Sexual revolution hits junior high

By Kim Painter, Special for USA TODAY

Picture the mating rites of middle-schoolers. Perhaps you imagine hand-holding and first kisses, girls trying out eye shadow, boys sneaking a peek at vulgar men's magazines.

Now look again, through the eyes of increasingly concerned educators and experts:

- Researchers in Washington, D.C., recently started a program to prevent early sexual activity. They planned to offer it to seventh-graders, but after a pilot study decided to target fifth-graders — because too many seventh-graders already were having sex.
- Jo Mecham, a nurse at a Bettendorf, Iowa, middle school, says she overhears "pretty explicit sexual talk" from boys and girls in her "conservative" community. And despite a dress code, girls come to classes looking like bare-bellied rock stars: "They'll leave the house totally OK, and when they get to school, they start disrobing."
- Joey Zbylut-Birky, a middle-school teacher in Omaha, recently asked students to think about "where they feel most comfortable" as part of an assignment to write song titles about themselves. A group of giggling boys piped up with comments about receiving oral sex.

The list goes on. Middle schools that used to do without dress codes now must send home exhaustive inventories of forbidden garments, from tube tops to too-low hip-huggers. Schools that used to handle crude language on a case-by-case basis now must have "no-profanity" policies. And sexual-harassment training is a normal part of middle-school curriculum.

The world "is rougher, it is sexier and it has reached down to touch boys and girls at younger ages," says Margaret Sagarese, who, with Charlene C. Giannetti, has written several books on parenting, including the new

YO!  
SOL

SM

*The Patience of a Saint: How Faith Can Sustain You During the Tough Times of Parenting.*

Baby-boomer parents who thought that nothing would ever shock them are shocked by the way their young teens talk, dress and perhaps even behave, Sagarese says.

"Things have changed," says Jude Swift, 52, a mother of five whose youngest is an eighth-grade boy. "I think a great deal of it is due to the media and what kids see on TV, in magazine ads, in videos. ... It's all about being sexy."

Swift, of Camillus, N.Y., says she picked up a *Teen People* magazine the other day and "I was amazed. It was page after page of young teens dressed in very provocative ways and in very provocative poses."

Young girls "do not see anything wrong in looking that way," says Zbylut-Birky, the Omaha teacher. And, she says, "they don't see the difference between how they should look for a party and how they should look in an educational setting."

### **Boys want to look sexy, too**

Even boys face increasing pressure to look sexy, says Sagarese: "There are 12-year-old boys going to GNC and taking all kinds of supplements because they want abs the same way girls want breasts."

Of course, many girls who dress like Britney Spears and many boys who talk like Eminem don't go beyond nervous note-passing in their actual romantic lives.

Zbylut-Birky, who overheard the oral-sex banter, says, "A lot of times they use that kind of language to impress their peers, but there's really nothing going on there."

But for some substantial minority of middle schoolers, something very risky — including intercourse and oral sex — is going on, some experts say. In 1995, government researchers asked teens over age 15 whether they'd had sexual intercourse by age 14; 19% of girls and 21% of boys said yes. In 1988, the numbers were 11% for girls and the same 21% for boys, says the Washington, D.C.-based research group Child Trends. Data for 2002 are just being collected.

Another study, using different methods, followed 12- to 14-year-olds between 1997 and 1999 and found 16% of girls and 20% of boys reported sex at 14 or younger, says Child Trends researcher Jennifer Manlove.

As for oral sex, a 2000 study from [the Alan Guttmacher Institute](#) in New York caused a firestorm by suggesting that more young teens were

engaging in that activity — possibly as a way of remaining technical virgins in the age of abstinence education. That study was based on scattered, anecdotal reports of increased oral herpes and gonorrhea of the throat.

No nationwide, scientific study has actually asked young teens, or older teens for that matter, whether they have oral sex.

"A lot of alarm parents feel on this issue is based on anecdotal information," says Bill Albert, spokesman for the Washington, D.C.-based National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a private, non-profit group working to reduce teen pregnancy.

But some of the anecdotes are hair-raising.

"The other day at school, a girl got caught in a bathroom with a boy performing oral sex on him," says Maurisha Stenson, a 14-year-old eighth-grader at a Syracuse, N.Y., middle school.

### **When the lights went on**

Denyia Sullivan, 14, attends a different Syracuse middle school but says she's seen and heard about similar things. One time, a girl performed oral sex on a boy in the gym bleachers during a movie. "The teacher turned on the light and there they were," Sullivan says. "Everybody was looking and laughing."

The two girls also say there's more than oral sex going on. Sullivan can think of five pregnant girls at her school, which includes sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders. Stenson guesses that "almost 50%" of kids at her school, for seventh- and eighth-graders, are engaging in some kind of sex.

"This is happening; they are telling the truth," says Courtney Ramirez, who directs the Syracuse Way to Go after-school program, designed to help kids succeed in school and avoid risks. Both girls are peer educators in the program.

"Youths are really getting involved in things a whole lot sooner than we thought," Ramirez says.

But other experts say that without good, current numbers on nationwide trends, they can't even say with any confidence that early sex is increasing. "It could be getting worse, it could be getting better, we just don't know," Albert says.

One problem is that the best government studies are done infrequently. Another is that researchers — and the public — are squeamish about asking detailed sex questions of young teens. And when they do ask, they aren't sure youngsters always understand the questions or answer

truthfully. Albert's organization will try to fill in the gap later this year with a report based on data from around the country.

But many educators and parents have heard the alarms and are acting now. Krystal McKinney directs a program that offers sex education and life-skills training to middle-school girls in the Washington, D.C., area. Since the 2000 Guttmacher oral sex report, she and her staff have redoubled efforts to make sure that girls understand the risks.

"We have kids who think you can't get diseases from oral sex," she says. "Kids think they know everything, but we challenge that."

With the youngest teens, clear information is crucial, says Xenia Becher, a mental health educator at the Syracuse after-school program.

Recently, she says, she asked some 13- to 15-year-olds to define sex. "They had trouble coming up with an answer," she says. "Some said it had to be between a male and female and a penis and vagina had to be involved.

"So I asked, 'What about if two men were involved?' 'Well,' they said, 'I don't know what that is, but it's not sex.' "

Becher also trains parents to discuss sex with their kids. She tells them that their voices matter, even in a sex-soaked culture.

"When you get down to what's right or wrong, popular culture is going to have an influence, but the stronger internal voice comes from you," she says.

Becher admits that setting limits and encouraging independence can be a real balancing act. When her own 13-year-old daughter dressed for a dance in a pair of "those nasty hip-huggers" and a short top, Becher says, she asked her to think how she'd look when "she was waving her arms around on the dance floor." But she didn't make her daughter change.

"You've got to pick your battles," she says.

### **Parents shouldn't back off**

"Kids really do care what their parents think," says Kristin Moore, president of Child Trends. "They don't really want their parents to back away. But a lot of parents do back away at this age."

Some parents, she says, are so intimidated by a child's hostile behavior and demands for privacy that they give far too much ground. "Sometimes parents are home during a party but have no idea what is going on at the party."

Mark Gibbons, an Augusta, Ga., father of two girls ages 8 and 12, says

that he and his wife are doing everything they can to stay involved. They try to talk to their daughters about everything. "We've told them that it may sometimes be embarrassing, but that we'd rather they get their information from us," he says.

"I talk to them all the time," says Lauryn, a seventh-grader who takes classes for gifted and talented kids. She does say that she prefers to discuss boyfriends with her mom.

Nevertheless, when Lauryn has friends over, Gibbons says he keeps his ears open. When she's instant messaging on the computer, he says, "Every once in a while, I'll just wander over there and ask who she's talking to. And I do look at her little directory and make sure all those user names are people that I know. We try not to show that we're being nosy, but we are."

Gibbons also chaperones middle-school dances. It's a window into his daughter's larger world — one that, even in a community of "pretty well-behaved kids," can be shocking, he says. "Some of the dancing they do is kind of risqué, to say the least."

Lauryn says she appreciates her parents' involvement: "I believe it does makes a difference. ... I have never gotten into trouble." And she says she does know kids who are getting into sexual trouble. "At some of the parties I go to, people playing 'Truth or Dare' will say that they've already 'done it,' " she says.

Meanwhile, Gibbons says he recently got a reminder that it is never too early to discuss sexual values. Third-grader Taylor "came home and said one little girl took a boy behind a tree and they were French kissing. ... I said, 'Well, do you think that is wrong?' She said, 'Yes.' "

But while parents are right to watch and worry, some may be worrying too much and enjoying too little about their children's pubescent years, says Sagarese, the parenting author. "I can't tell you how many parents have come up to me at speeches and they are apoplectic that their daughter is kissing. They feel like the first kiss is a runaway train that will lead to AIDS or pregnancy."

Her co-author, Giannetti, says, "Parents need to take a deep breath and a step back and remember what it was like to be a young adolescent."

Sometimes, Sagarese says, a first kiss is just a first kiss — and the same lovely rite of passage it was in a more innocent time.

---

The Morgan Stanley logo is displayed in white text on a dark blue rectangular background.

---

[Front Page](#) [News](#) [Money](#) [Sports](#) [Life](#) [Tech](#) [Weather](#) [Shop](#)

[Terms of service](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [How to advertise](#) [About us](#)  
© Copyright 2002 USA TODAY, a division of [Gannett Co. Inc.](#)