



# Deborah Roffman

## Talk To Me First:

### *Common Sense About Kids and Sex*

March 18 & 19, 2014

*"There are no 'bad' parents – there are simply those who parent, and those who don't."*

- Deborah Roffman

During her 35 years of working with 4th through 12th grade students, Deborah Roffman has not lost sight of her goal. She wants to educate the next generation about how to create happy, healthy and respectful sexual experiences. Ms. Roffman had a different goal when addressing the Common Ground audiences in March 2014. She wanted every parent to leave her talk feeling empowered. She views parents as the primary protective factor regarding a child's risky behavior. "We can do great things in schools," explains Ms. Roffman. "Yet we cannot begin to touch what you can do at home."

According to Ms. Roffman, open communication between parent and child is key. A parent may feel as if they need a 'do-over' regarding a certain conversation they had with their child. Ms. Roffman pointed out that parenting is *always* a do-over, and that the best way to build trust with your children is to request that 'do-over.' She encouraged all the parents in the audience to make that do-over request of their child first thing tomorrow morning.

Deborah Roffman's THREE main points about sexuality education:

1. **There is no such thing as "The Talk"** – Healthy sexual education is ongoing and happens in a spiral. Families need to recognize that sexuality is a discipline/topic that has to do with *everything* in the world that is connected to sex, gender, reproduction – it's everywhere. Children from families who know how to start this dialog grow up to have healthier sexual relationships.
2. **GOAL = postponement, postponement, postponement** – Ms. Roffman sees the word abstinence as highly overrated. She prefers you speak specifically of postponement – from what, with whom, and for how long. The longer parents can delay their child's involvement in potentially risky behaviors, the better equipped those children will be to handle those situations as they arise. Teach critical thinking skills – you want your children to be proactive and to make selective, informed choices.
3. **Use a developmental approach to broach the topic of sexuality** – It is important for parents to educate themselves about who children are developmentally, and to work together as an adult community to reinforce childhood. Adolescents are *not* adults – they need to learn how to transition between childhood and adulthood. We are the first generation of parents to have multi-billion dollar corporations trying to come between our children and us. The concept of a 'tween' is not real. Rather, it was an idea created by marketers to define a child between the ages of 8 and 14. Kids of this age have discretionary income – so the marketer's goal was to get 8-14 year olds to think of themselves as 'adult-like.' Ms. Roffman believes that five year-old children should *not* have cell phones and 10 year-olds do *not* need Facebook pages. We need to take back the power from the marketers and BE the parents and SET the limits. We need to get our common sense back and connect it to sexuality.

Girls get their period, on average, at age 12.5 and are 26.5 years old when they marry. Boys first ejaculate, on average, at 13.5 years, and marry at 27.5 years. There is a 14-year gap between sexual maturity and marriage. Some refer to this gap as the 'hook-up' period – the adult community needs to change that mentality. With respect to ALL sexual choices during that 14 year period – from kisses to intercourse – parents need to prepare children/young adults how to move from saying 'No, not yet' to eventually 'Yes, I'm ready.' To make that move, a young adult should ask themselves two separate questions:

- Under what circumstances might it be okay, good, right, healthy, and in my/my partner's best interest to say YES to that behavior?; and

- Under what circumstances might it be okay, good, right, healthy, and in my/my partner's best interest to say NO to that behavior?

All children – regardless of gender - need to have permission to say yes and to make their own informed decisions.

**With 5th/6th graders**, parents have to be willing to talk about things openly. The 'keep it in the box until they're ready' mentality, implies to the child that this information may be dangerous. Honest information from you as the parent should always be viewed as safe.

**7th-8th graders** need to see as many adults as possible available to them as resources. They also need a SINGLE standard for both genders – sexuality should be associated with ethics and morality, not gender. Girls, especially, need to stop referring to other girls as 'sluts' and to build each other up, not tear each other down. Prohibit that type of talk in your home and family.

**9th-11th graders** don't want to rebel – they push away their parents simply to get some space. And, they actually DO want to talk to you about sexuality. Use the line, "I cannot be a good parent unless we have a conversation. I'll get some books and we can both look at them."

**HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS** need to assess their risk and protective factors. Be aware that the first semester of freshman year in college may be the most dangerous time in their lives.

### **Parenting about sexuality uses the SAME five skills as does good parenting**

Children have five fundamental nurturing needs. When they can meet these needs on their own, then they are adults. When your child asks you a sexually-charged question, calm down and recognize that it is a question about one of the five needs – NOT just about sex.

- **Need #1 - Affirmation** – unconditional love for who the child is (if not always for their behavior). Hold a mirror up in front of your child's life and reflect it back to them so that your child knows that you 'get' them and that they exist. Look behind the child's eyes – see the world as they see it. Identify and validate the child's unique characteristics, affect, psychosocial environment and world view.
- **Need #2 - Information** – providing information in context and in a manner attuned to the child's cognitive ability and particular stage of development. The seemingly sexual questions your children ask are not always about sex. For example, at age 5 – *where did I come from?* may be a question about geography. At age 6 – *how did I get there?* may be a question of transportation. At age 7 – *how did I get there in the first place?* may be an existential question about the foundations of existence.
- **Need #3 - Clarity About Values** – our culture does not express clear values about sexuality. Our kids are not thriving around the issues of sex and gender because our culture is not clear on these topics. Adults need to set limits down about how much is too much and how much is too little. Determine the most important values that you want to instill in your children, and then live them in your own life – if you want honest kids, act with integrity.
- **Need #4 - Limit Setting** – making certain that clear, reasonable age-appropriate boundaries are firmly in place in children's lives. Insist on the mantra that independence is earned, and be prepared to negotiate limits and boundaries where appropriate as children mature.
- **Need #5 - Anticipatory Guidance** – educate yourself about the developmental challenges ahead. Impart communication, interpersonal, problem solving, decision-making, assertiveness and risk management skills. Help your children anticipate 'what ifs' and eventually incorporate 'what if' thinking. Help them 'walk through' in advance situations they may face. For example, ask the following questions: You want to go to that party – what might happen? What else might happen? How would you feel? What would you do? If they can't give you any ideas of what might happen, they aren't developmentally ready to go to the party. As the parent, you have the right to say, "I do not think that you, as a 15 year old, can handle a 16 year old situation. You're staying home tonight."