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Not your parents' sex-ed class 'Heart to Heart' provides guidance to kids in a sexualized society

by Alexandria Rocha

On their instructor's cue, a room full of dads and sons at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital shouted at the top of their lungs: "Penis! Penis! Penis!"

Some turned red in the face. Others grinned and glanced knowingly around, heads nodding in brotherly approval.

But, the cheer was only the beginning. Dads were then told to call out slang terms for the male organ. The group applauded when one dad shouted, "The Bishop," and again when another sang out, "Big Jim and the Twins."

It sounds like pledge season at a rowdy university, or perhaps group therapy for the Y chromosome. However, it is Dr. Rob Lehman's method of teaching one of the most difficult and complex topics to discuss with kids: sexuality education. Lehman, a pediatrician who specializes in adolescent medicine, addresses the slang terms upfront for one reason — to get them out of the way.

The straightforward approach seems to work.

"It's not uncomfortable to talk about this stuff here. Everyone is talking about it," said Zach Kaplan, 11, of Palo Alto, who attended Lehman's class with his dad earlier this year.

Lehman has been teaching these two-part workshops, called "Heart to Heart," for boys ages 9 to 13 and their dads or guardians for more than 10 years. His counterpart is Julie Metzger, a registered nurse who developed the separate sessions for girls and their moms or guardians 17 years ago in Pittsburgh. The pair now teach the workshops at both Lucile Packard and the Seattle Children's Hospital.

The workshops are widely popular and routinely sell out.

Programs like Heart to Heart may have been unheard of 20 years ago. However, in today's Internet Age with social networking sites like MySpace and other highly-sexualized media, adolescent sexual awareness and expectations have reached an all-time high.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is also reporting that nearly half of the new HIV cases occur in people under age 25.

Faced with this kind of challenge, many parents are now looking for resources, such as Heart to Heart, that use a friendly approach and provide a healthy perception of sex because they don't necessarily feel equipped to guide children through today's sexually-fueled society. This is not the sex education of generations' past.

"Unfortunately, the world has changed. What we thought was normal has no bearing on your kids' lives," said Nancy Brown, an associate with the Palo Alto Medical Foundation's Research Institute. "Most 12 year olds have heard the words 'oral sex.' That doesn't fit into our plan of parenting."

Holding two dry-erase markers like guns at the ready, Metzger opens the first of two girls' and moms' sessions of Heart to Heart with a group game of Pictionary. With help from the audience, Metzger draws five pictures — a baby, a girl at 9, a girl at 16, a mom, and a grandmother. She opens the discussion up about similarities and differences in girls and women.

Within minutes, the room is full of giggles. Metzger discusses getting giant feet during puberty, which is "really fun for your parents because you get lots of shoes," painting your nails, and of course breasts that "look fantastic and they're amazing, but what are they good for?"

For two hours, Metzger drives her messages home and peppers them with lighthearted jokes. She covers many of the same topics Lehman does, including shaving, body odor, acne and hair growth. Their presentations diverge at puberty, the other sexes' body parts and sex. Metzger also touches on eating disorders, while Lehman discusses steroids. Lehman leads a penis chant; Metzger holds an "I am fabulous!" cheer.

"We need to start celebrating who our bodies are becoming," Metzger tells them.

Parents who attend Heart to Heart say it is drastically different than the sex education they received as kids.

Janet Devereux of Menlo Park, who brought her 11-year-old daughter, Emily, to a Heart to Heart series in January, said her school showed students a short video and that was it for sex education. Her mom wouldn't even let her see it.

"It wasn't a very open thing then," Devereux said. "For me and for my daughter, it's easier for her to hear it from someone else, an expert. It's more credible, it's not just coming from mom."

Lehman said when it comes to sex education, kids respond well to experts.

"It's kind of uncomfortable to talk to my mom about this stuff," said Julia Olson, 10, who also went with her mom to a Heart to Heart earlier this year.

Metzger, in fact, shares the story of her sex education with her classes.

"When we were your age, we didn't come to classes like this," she said. "We had

embarrassed parents, too. We would sit in a dark cafeteria and watch a film strip."

Besides providing information, one of the primary purpose of the workshops is to help parents ease into such awkward topics. Lehman said this is often more difficult for dads than moms because of a "code of silence" dads and sons traditionally have about sex and puberty.

"I think most dads have no problem talking to their sons about shaving, but when it comes to how does one have sex, what does female genitalia look like, it's those things they get uncomfortable with," Lehman said. "We model how they should be talking about these issues. Many dads say, 'Thank you for starting the conversation.'"

Comprehensive sex education programs, such as Heart to Heart, combine information about condoms and contraception with an abstinence message. While parents are considered kids' main resource, teaching kids about sexuality has become increasingly complex in recent years, and many parents are looking toward schools or outside programs to teach what they can't.

The state Department of Education does not require schools to offer sex education, but the majority of schools do, according to a 2003 report by the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California (ACLU) titled "Sex Education in California Public Schools: Are Students Learning What They Need to Know?" If a school decides to teach sex education, there are state standards. The state has required schools to teach HIV/AIDS education since 1992.

The Palo Alto Unified School District has a sex-education curriculum called "The Great Body Shop," a nationally recognized comprehensive health and substance abuse prevention program, for its elementary schools. Becki-Cohn Vargas, the district's curriculum and professional development director for the elementary grades, said it is each school's discretion how to use the Great Body Shop.

Most districts in California, including Palo Alto, provide sex education on a school-by-school basis. That type of control allows principals and teachers to gear their programs toward their sites' communities and classrooms.

At Palo Alto's three middle schools, sex education is shared between science and physical education teachers. In the high schools it's split between physical education and life skills teachers. Burton Cohen, director of curriculum and professional development for the high schools, said there are many different materials for teachers to choose.

"All of (the materials) emphasize life responsibilities and also the scientific view, (which includes) the physical properties of the sexual act, how science works, what science knows about it," he said.

Cohen said the Palo Alto Unified School District has been offering comprehensive sex education for as long as he can remember. There may have been a video like the one Devereux's mom didn't want her to see and the one Metzger watched, but there

has always been an emphasis on mindful relationships.

Palo Alto's public schools, however, are in the minority when it comes to teaching sex education in grades earlier than sixth-grade. According to the ACLU's report, about three-fourths of the 150 districts surveyed do not teach sex education earlier than sixth-grade. The survey targeted only unified districts, which serve kindergarten through 12th-grade students.

Cohn-Vargas said many students here receive HIV/AIDS education in fourth-grade when most of the students are 9 years old. In fifth-grade, Cohn-Vargas said there is a broader course on growing up, which includes information on puberty, hormones, and sexuality, similar to Heart to Heart.

By the time the kids enter high school here, some say the information is old hat. At a recent performance of "Secrets," a Kaiser Permanente Educational Theatre program about HIV, AIDS and sexually-transmitted diseases, held at Gunn High School, senior Roscoe Linstadt, 17, wore his headphones the whole time.

"Everyone in Palo Alto pretty well knows about that stuff," said Gunn freshman Samantha Riley, 13.

But, there is reason to pay attention, or at least tune in with one ear. In a survey conducted by students of Palo Alto High School's newspaper, the Campanile, in November, 20 percent of the 445 teenagers surveyed said they have engaged in sexual intercourse, while 29 percent said they have engaged in oral sex.

Paly living skills teacher Leticia Burton has said today's teen movies often show "teens having lots of sex, often risky sex," which likely has a direct correlation with what today's adolescents are doing.

Burton is on the mark.

According to a recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the number of sexual scenes on television has nearly doubled since 1998. The study, which measured 1,000 hours of programming in all genres, found that 70 percent of all shows include some sexual content, averaging five sexual scenes per hour. This is compared to 56 percent of shows with sexual content and 3.2 scenes per hour in 1998.

Mixed messages about sexuality in movies, music and television are all too common. One of the most major headline-grabbing examples of this happened two years ago during the halftime show of Super Bowl XXXVIII, when pop diva Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction briefly revealed her breast. While Jackson's incident caused a national fervor, a commercial for a penile-enhancement medication that aired a few minutes was quite alright.

There are also sexually-explicit commercials in unexpected markets — such as the Carl's Jr. ad in May 2005 with Hollywood socialite Paris Hilton wearing a provocative swimsuit, eating a burger and washing a car. The research director for the Parents Television Council called the commercial "soft-core porn."

Just standing in line at the grocery store, kids today are exposed to racy headlines on popular women's magazines. Last month's "Cosmopolitan": "His secret pleasure zone."

"We have a schizophrenic society, which endorses sex in advertising, but condemns it when kids want to act on it," Lehman said. "In the old days, no one wanted to talk about it. That was it. Parents are faced with it now."

For more information on the Heart to Heart series, visit www.lpch.org.

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