

Conversation Starter Puberty Workshop Gets Kids Talking

By Melinda Sacks, Special to the Mercury News

Body odor. Shaving. Acne.

These are some of the concerns of boys 10 to 12 years old, says pediatrician Robert Lehman.

Breasts. Bras. Pimples. These are the worries of girls of the same age, says his colleague Julie Metzger.

Lehman and Metzger should know. For the past 15 years, they have been bringing parents and their preteens together in workshops to talk about these and other not-so-easy topics. The idea is to help families navigate the changes that come with puberty and to give them a framework for communication during an often volatile time. The workshops fill up every time because parents are eager for help in starting the conversation.

"I have been kind of contemplating how to introduce my daughter to the facts of life because I don't want her to find out through the grapevine," says Aggie Eidson of Concord. "She was asking me about when she could wear a bra, and then one of her friends got her period. Then she ! said something about sex, and I asked her what it is, and she said it's when you kiss a lot and get a baby. I said, 'OK, it's time.' " Eidson and her daughter were among the 60 pairs of parents and their children who crowded the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford recently to attend the Heart to Heart workshop, which spans two nights, two auditoriums and dozens of prickly subjects.

Safe setting

By separating the groups -- girls and their mothers upstairs, boys and their fathers downstairs -- Lehman and Metzger provide a safe, open setting for talking about everything from sexual feelings and pubic hair to bras and pimples.

"Every parent in the world says, 'I know I should be saying this out loud, but where do I start?' " says Metzger, who founded Heart to Heart.

"Parents often don't talk because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing or giving the wrong answer, but what you need to do is build a platform of always making ! yourself available."

Carol Walovich of Redwood City knows what Metzger is talking about. She attended Heart to Heart with the youngest of her three daughters, Grace, 12.

"I think what makes it so hard to start the conversation is the parents' own hesitancy with their sexuality," she says. "Sex is just tough to talk about for everybody. As a parent, it's really hard because the end result is always, 'Honey, this is how you got here,' and it's, 'Oh my God, Mom, what are you telling me?' "

When Metzger researched girls and the start of menstruation 15 years ago in Pittsburgh for her thesis, the girls she surveyed reported that their parents were

their No. 1 resource, but the parents said they were uncomfortable in their role. That finding was the motivation for the first mother-daughter class, says Metzger, a registered nurse.

Since then the workshops have been affiliated with Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle, and others have joined the teaching team, including Lehman. Lucile Packard is one of the first satellite programs.

"This course, in effect, does something fairly magical," Lehman says. "It puts the parent and the child at the same place, hearing the information at the same time. It does not subvert the role of the parent. It strengthens it. We don't get judgmental on any of the big-ticket items. We emphasize that families have different rules and this is a good time to discuss it."

Walovich already is using what she learned.

"In our house, we used the course as a handspring for so many other issues that have come up. Things you see on TV. Things that happen in the community. A lot of relationship-building things they covered were tremendous. The whole idea of everyone being important and included. That theme occurs over and over. The haves and the have-nots."

Warm-up game

On the first evening, the girls are shy and silent. But during a warm-up game resembling Pictionary, Metzger races them as they draw a baby, a 9-year-old girl, a teenager, a mother and a grandmother. Within minutes, everyone is laughing. "What's the difference?" she calls out, pointing to the stick figures she has scribbled on a board at the front of the auditorium. "They are getting fatter and taller?" asks one girl tentatively.

"Let's say shape and height are changing," Metzger suggests. It is the positive spin fundamental to the discussion of "the hit parade of puberty," a range of issues covered during the two sessions.

Downstairs, the boys are moving into similar territory. Lehman has found that talking about anatomy can get sidetracked with the laughter and embarrassment that accompany the discussion, so he uses the same technique each time he displays the drawing of male genitalia to precede the presentation.

"I decided one day to just get it out," he explains, "so I had the entire group yell, 'Penis, penis, penis!' three times really loudly as a group. They loved it, and it stopped the giggling. It was like saying something you weren't allowed to say, and doing it with your dad, so it was a bonding experience. Then we could move on." Lehman also asks the boys to anonymously write down what they worry about, then he reads the cards aloud to the group. Sharing worries lets the boys know they are not alone in their concerns, and it gives parents an idea of what is going on in their child's head before beginning the conversation.

"The differences between boys and girls are enormous," he says. "Girls tend to be more expressive in language and in physical expression of emotion. Girls write far more extensive questions about feelings and emotions. Boys are happy to be just told how it works."

John Tang, a San Carlos father of a 10-year-old son, says attending Heart to Heart was a sort of pre-emptive strike.

"My son is getting to an age where he is becoming aware, and it is important for me to be there," he says. "He hasn't started asking questions yet, and he still talks about! girls being yucky, so I'm not pushing it. The biggest thing about the workshop is being there with my son and his becoming aware that I am not afraid to talk about it."

Perhaps the most important thing girls and boys learn at Heart to Heart, say Lehman and Metzger, is that parents are their best resources for information and help. Most of the pairs at Heart to Heart are parents or stepparents and their same-sex children, but grandparents, other relatives and even opposite-sex parents or guardians are also welcome at the mother-daughter and father-son sessions. The questions begin

After a break, it's question-and-answer time. Metzger has organized a thick stack of index cards by subject. Along the way, she whips out a tampon and shows how it works, then unwraps a panty liner, explains the logistics and playfully sticks it to the front of her shirt to demonstrate the adhesive.

The questions range from "Why do people sleep naked while having sex instead of sleeping with a shirt on?" to "Did you say your period lasts four to seven days, or 47 days?"

Many of the questions are about "the whole logistics thing," says Metzger. "'Am I ready? What is a tampon? What is an erection? How do I shave?'" "Some parents think they are supposed to step back when their kids get older, but I say step in or stay planted. If you keep stepping back, they can't trust you will be there. The parent can say, 'Hey, I'm the logistics guy. What do you need to move forward on that?'"

Kayleigh, 9, is heading for the cookies and juice when she stops to talk. "It's kind of weird," she says. "It sounds weird about what's going to happen to you. It happened to my friend -- a period. I got kind of scared. It sounds kind of scary. But it's good to know what's going to happen."

The entire book list from "Heart to Heart" is online at:
www.chmc.org/childhealthsafety/pdf/flyers/ce059.pdf

Here are some recommendations:

For Girls:

"The Care and Keeping of You; The Body Book for Girls" by Valorie Schaefer et al, American Girl Library, 104 pp., \$9.95

www.4girls.gov

For Boys:

"What's Happening Down There? Answers to Questions Boys Find Hard To Ask," by Karen Gravelle et al, 128 pp., \$8.95

For Both:

"It's So Amazing! A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies and Families" by Robie H. Harris et al, 81 pp., \$21.99

To register for upcoming Heart to Heart classes, go to www.lpch.org and click on

News and Events. Or call (650) 723-4600. The fee for the two-part class is \$60 per family. Scholarships are available. Classes are scheduled on Tuesday evenings as well as Saturdays this fall.

The same instructors will be offering adults a "Mothers of Sons" class on Oct. 25 as well as a "Fathers of Daughters" class. The fee is \$35.

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