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## Giggles, Blushes - And Straight Answers On Sex

By Sherry Stripling

Ten minutes into the final session of a "heart-to-heart" three-night class for mothers and daughters, teacher Julie Giesy gets to the good part.

Giesy, a registered nurse who studied the menarche, a girl's first menstrual period, for her master's degree, is a pleasing combination of one-quarter mirth, three-quarters trust. She's heard it all. She plays her audience like a veteran talk-show hostess, building the suspense.

"Finally," she says to the wide-eyed 9- to 12-year-olds sitting next to their wide-eyed mothers in the Children's Hospital and Medical Center auditorium, "we get to talk about boys."

It's been a long time in coming. At the first session, they talked about physical changes and the start of menstruation. The second one addressed social issues, peer pressure, self-esteem. The third is supposed to put it all together and let the teacher and girls talk about . . . to talk openly and freely about . . . well, **sex**.

These days we tend to hear more about **sex** gone wrong than about the wonders of **sex**. Teen pregnancy. Diseases. Coercion or worse. But studies show kids who grow up in families that openly discuss sexual development tend to delay sexual activities. Programs such as this one open communication.

Giesy's presentation uses mixed media. Books. Slides. Her own drawings, which look more like outlines of moose heads and oil spouts than women's and men's "equipment." And lots of questions, most starting with "Um."

But for the good stuff, Giesy pulls out a video. This little introductory part about the girls will be over quickly, she tells the class as the video begins.

"Remember we don't talk about what is normal, we talk about what is unique," she says, continuing the political correctness that is the theme of the class and appears with such small touches as the video announcer saying, "If you decide to have children."

"There are unique things about boys and there are things about boys that are the same as for girls," Giesy says.

Those unique things about boys are suddenly on the screen in full-color drawings. Whoa. Hold on a minute. This is too fast!

One little girl is about doubled over. With every mention of "penis" or "testicle" or even the word "mate," she scrunches up her shoulders, turns to the little girl next to her and squelches another wave of nervous laughter. Her mouth is so unevenly compressed it looks like corrugated metal on a warped-wood roof.

Her friend, meanwhile, is staying cool, except for the death grip she has on her mother's arm.

All this and we haven't even gotten to what happens when his . . . gets together with her . . .

When the girls' first "R-rated" film ends, Giesy congratulates them on maintaining their composure. This is an especially young group, lots of 9- and 10-year-olds, and yet they weathered exposure to the facts of life without once shouting the most common response, "Oh, no way!"

#### A CHANCE TO START TALKING

Giesy, who has put 500 mothers and daughters through these paces since starting a similar program in her former home of Philadelphia, can attest to some refreshing news: Innocence is not dead.

The boy part was interesting, but the real heart of Giesy's talk is about sexual relations and how that relates to choices. She talks about when intimacy is appropriate and how it harkens back to earlier discussions on feelings, actions and consequences.

Many of the mothers say they came because when they were 10, development and sexual relationships were either not discussed by their families or discussed only negatively.

Giesy reminds the girls that their best resource is sitting next to them. Giesy tells them their family or church may have strong feelings about certain issues, and the girls need to take those feelings into consideration as they make their choices.

She's careful to balance the negative with the positive, but she gives two rules:

-- No one has to have **sex** just to please someone else.

-- Having **sex** will not make love happen.

The girls fill out cards with general questions. Their mothers, meanwhile, scribble their own **answers** to a specific question: "If I could tell my daughter one thing about **sex**, it would be . . ."

"Why do people have **sex**, anyway?" one pre-teen's card reads.

This discussion prompts one mother to point out the value of waiting until you're married, and two others to talk so warmly about the pleasure of intimate contact with the right person that one of the daughters sinks down and slaps a hand over her eyes.

Q: "Do you have to be awake to have **sex**?"

Giesy: "Yes, but you can have **sex** when you're in that drowsy state."

Q: "How old were you when you first had **sex**?"

With this one Giesy pauses. She has already told them there is no one right age to start dating, and that she has two children but has had **sex** more than twice.

That sort of thing can remain your own secret, she **answers**.

"But because we are being very open and honest with each other here . . ." - mothers and daughters again lean forward in their seats - "I will tell you I was an adult and I'll leave it that."

#### FUEL FOR MORE DISCUSSIONS

In evaluations of the program, mothers thank Giesy and organizer Mary Turner for providing spark for future discussion. One said she appreciates the emphasis of **sex** "within a relationship." Others wanted more information on safe **sex** or sexual orientation.

One daughter complained that the younger girls were encouraged to make silly remarks, but the bulk talked about how comfortable they felt, perhaps because no question was considered dumb, even the one about what happens if a woman and a goat . . .

"In the car before we came I thought, 'Oh, gee, we're going to be talking about **sex**, how embarrassing,' " said Kathleen Driscoll, 10, a fourth-grader at Olympic View Elementary. "But now I find it really easy to talk about embarrassing things."

Kathleen's mother, Clare Wey-Driscoll, said the class won't take the place of any discussions she had planned, "but it provides an easy entree."

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