

ON THE MOVE

What's the buzz on the birds and the bees?



Did your parents ever approach you about the birds and bees? Chances are, you learned quickly that the discussion wouldn't be about creatures that chirp or buzz.

At first, Faith Pleckan wished that that had been the case.

Although some teens interviewed for this story said they never felt ill at ease discussing sex with their parents, Faith admitted that she had been self-conscious.

Faith's parents had "the talk" with her while she was in seventh grade. She recalled being uncomfortable discussing such topics as sexual intercourse and sexual body parts with them.

"I felt stupid. I think I was embarrassed more than they were," Faith said, explaining that she already knew much of the terminology but wasn't used to talking about sex with her mom and dad.

However, Faith added that "the talk" was valuable because from that point on, she was more comfortable bringing up sexual topics with her parents.

"You hear words on the bus. I would go to my mom and say, 'Mom, what does transvestite mean?' Or, 'What does masturbate mean?'" said Faith, 15, a parishioner at Holy Name of Jesus Church in Greece and sophomore at Aquinas Institute.

Asked how often she and her parents talk about sex, Faith replied, "Every time I get a new boyfriend." She explained that her parents remind her to not feel obligated to have sex simply because somebody might ask her to. In addition, she said, her mom and dad also stress Catholic Church teaching that forbids sexual intercourse before marriage.

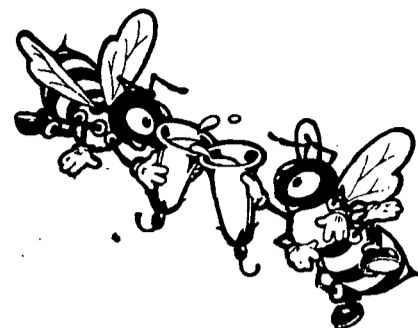
Gary Foster, also, said he began talking about sex with his parents around seventh grade.

"Both parents said that if I had any questions, they would answer them," said Gary, 18, from St. Louis Church in Pittsford.

Like Faith, Gary said this communication level with his parents was crucial because now he feels he "could always go to them" for any discussion on sexuality.

Ralph Masters said that his family, as well, has been very open in their conversations about sexuality with him.

"My parents were never uncomfortable," said Ralph, 17, from



Holy Spirit Church in Penfield.

Yet this level of openness doesn't extend to everyone in Gary and Ralph's Christian human sexuality at McQuaid Jesuit High School. In fact, five of 11 people in one session said

they'd never talked openly about sexual matters with their parents.

"Not even a try," remarked Alex Santiago, 18, from St. Michael's Church in Rochester.

"I don't want to talk to them about it. I think it would make everybody feel awkward," said Patrick Irving, 17.

Another class member, Frank Baumgardner, said that some people feel more comfortable discussing sex with people closer to their own age.

"My little brother has asked me questions, and I've asked my friend's older brother," said Frank, 17, from St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Leicester.

Father Fred Betti, SJ, who teaches the course, said that schools, also, provide extensive information about sexuality. He noted that his class brings an added touch because it blends scientific data with Catholic teachings, an option not available in public schools because public-school sex education does not allow for moral debate.

"The difference is the whole moral and values context from which we look at the topic: Is using the condom morally correct? Is having sexual relationships outside of marriage correct?" Father Betti said.

Parents and other educators shouldn't delay in discussing sex with young adolescents, Faith said. She explained that talking about sex may not prevent a teen from becoming sexually active, but it might help give teens early information about such topics as pregnancy, contraception and AIDS.

"It should be before they go through puberty," Faith commented, adding that she knows of peers who became sexually active as early as eighth grade.

Faith emphasized that it's important for adolescents to learn about sexual matters from a trusted source.

"I get a lot of information from the movies, and it's so false. They make (sex) sound so much better," Faith remarked.

COMING NEXT WEEK:
Non-Catholic religious events

'A lot of little talks'

Although a parent's first discussion with his/her child about sexuality is commonly known as "the talk," Michael Theisen doesn't particularly care for that term.

"It should be a lot of little talks," remarked Theisen, who serves as diocesan youth ministry coordinator. He explained that one talk cannot possibly cover all aspects of sexuality.

Theisen said that an environment should exist where parents and teens can easily discuss sexual matters whenever a question arises. He also stressed that the parents should be the first people to initiate these discussions.

"It definitely should begin in the home," said Theisen, who gave a lecture, "Beyond the Birds and Bees: A Look at Teenage Sexuality," this past fall at the National Conference on Catholic Youth Ministry in Cincinnati.

But Theisen also acknowledged that this is no easy task. "It can be an uncomfortable and embarrassing experience for both the parent and the teen," he said.

On the other hand, Theisen noted that avoiding the topic may only create more tension up the road for the parents and children.

"The less you talk about it, the more significant the talk becomes. The more you talk, the talk never really happens," he explained.

Theisen also said that parents and children shouldn't delay in having these discussions because we're living in a society that freely promotes sexual activity through television, magazines and music — and, more recently, the Internet.

"It started happening with music and media advertisements starting in the 1960s. The images and the messages are out there," Theisen said.

He said that Catholic adults can combat this problem by discussing sexuality from their faith's perspective — that premarital sex, abortion and the use of contraceptives is wrong.

If parents don't make the effort, then teens' view of sex will be shaped by the media, he warned.

"Do we want Hollywood and the record companies doing that, or do we want us doing it?" Theisen remarked.

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