

## **Wellness Summit on “Sexuality and Brookline Teens” April 2015**

Sexuality plays a role in so many facets of teen life, from how kids dress in the morning to how they feel about themselves in interactions with peers during the school day. On April 9, B-PEN (Brookline Parent Education Network) and Brookline’s Wellness Committee sponsored a community discussion on teen sexuality addressing social media, sexting's social and legal consequences, the impact of media on self-esteem and body image, the new norms of the dating, hook-up culture, the role of parents, LGBTQ issues, and problem of sexual harassment/assault and teen dating violence. The summit gathered a select group of school administrators and staff, mental health and public health professionals, community members, Brookline parents, and students to help craft strategies to better support Brookline teens.

The summit opened with a BHS student performance of an excerpt from the play “Good Kids,” which highlighted a case about a girl incapacitated by alcohol whose rape was posted on social media. During its run, the play generated terrific discussions about male and female sexuality and the issues of double standards and bystanders, making audiences reexamine how we should be dealing with teen sexuality in the current “hook up” culture, which is very different from the dating scene of years past.

BHS social worker Mary Minott, Brookline Prevention/Intervention Program Coordinator, introduced the basic premise of the forum – that sexuality plays a major role in how teens dress and feel about themselves and others. And every day, students at BHS struggle with issues like intimacy, love, sexual orientation, body image, and personal values. She highlighted some of the statistics from BHS’s latest “Youth Risk Behavior Survey:”

- 1 in 4 BHS teens reported having had sexual intercourse
- 1 in 4 who’d had intercourse reported not using condoms
- 1 in 7 reported 3 or more partners (lower than the state average)
- 1 in 4 experienced STIs (sexually transmitted infections)
- 1 in 10 reported assault by a dating partner or someone they knew
- 1 in 7 reported sexual contact against their will
- 28% of teens reported they had taken and sent naked pictures of themselves (sexting)

Officer Prentice Pilot summarized what is currently being taught in the schools through the AWARE program regarding how the internet effects sexual behavior. Initially, internet education addressed mostly awareness of cyber predators. However, with smart phones serving as small computers, internet issues have evolved. Kids are able to “hang out with strangers” online, so parents need to be more involved in what their teens do online.

The curriculum addresses a range of realistic situations students can get into. While Brookline students tend to have a good grasp on what they should and shouldn’t be doing online, they still make mistakes like sexting. Just having pictures on one’s phone is considered possession of child pornography. If sent to someone else, it is “disseminating material,” a serious issue. Often a lot of peer pressure is involved. Social worker Jorge Membreno reports that he often hears kids refer to sexting as part of the dating culture, part of courtship, with the expectation attached that sending nude pictures gives a partner “ownership of a piece of who you are.” Once someone receives a nude picture, they hold power over that person, creating an alarming imbalance in the power dynamic. Officer Pilot uses the caveat: “Make sure whatever you send online is something you wouldn’t mind your mother seeing.” The Diversionary Program and other initiatives help educate and protect kids, encouraging good decision-making and urging mindful, respectful, and empathetic behavior, reinforcing the moral/ethical aspects rather than the legal approach.

Dean Anthony Meyer (Grades 9 and 11) reported that adults at BHS work to provide a wide and tight support and safety net for kids. Fellow students are also incredibly helpful in keeping their peers safe and bringing concerns to adults. Parents can add what they are seeing at home to give a full picture of any troubling ongoing issues. Guidance counselors are often the first to hear about issues with relationships, teachers, a new app that's worrisome, etc. A few times a year, the deans hear about sexting, less frequently about assaults. They then work with social workers, therapists, police, Brookline Mental Health, etc. to work with students who could be victims as well as any alleged perpetrators in school to try to tease out what's happening and who might need help. The handbook lays out rules about respect for others, and discipline takes a variety of forms. Kids often say they don't want to get anyone in trouble, but BHS wants to prevent future occurrences. It's all about trying to keep kids safe and focused on learning and growing.

Teddi Jacobs, Brookline Public Schools Coordinator of Health and PE, spoke about the health curriculum, which focuses on prevention and starts in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade with intro to adolescence, puberty, and the human reproductive system. It continues through 9<sup>th</sup> grade, taking in healthy vs. unhealthy relationships, boundaries, media literacy, sexual identity, abstinence, postponement, preventing STI's and pregnancy, informed decision-making, and general emotional wellness. During 7-8<sup>th</sup> grades, students get the "Get Real" curriculum. Research shows that education delays the onset of risk behaviors, so the curriculum is about giving students tools to make wise decisions. Throughout all the content areas, the curriculum integrates the practice of communication skills -- assertiveness, refusal, resistance, etc. Every grade level has assignments to be done with parents, providing an opportunity to open the conversation and discuss values within the family. It is vital that parents stay engaged as their child's primary health educator.

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After the information session, participants broke into table discussions to address some of the main issues impacting teen sexuality, then reported back to the full group on ideas and strategies generated by their discussions. Several points were made repeatedly:

- Parents need to stay connected to their teens even as they try to pull away and develop their own identities. Parents are still their teens' primary sexuality educators.
- In talking with teens about sexuality, constantly reinforce the CERTS model of healthy relationships (Consent, Equality, Respect, Trust, Safety).
- Health education in school should continue beyond 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Teens need a refresher course of some kind in 10-12<sup>th</sup> grades to revisit sexual health when they are more prone to be active.
- Having adult support is key -- parents/guardians/people at school to talk to about problems and making healthy choices makes a big difference. The middle schools as well as BHS need a systematic way to assure all students have at least one trusted adult they can go to for any issues.
- Bathroom stalls could be used to disseminate info -- resources, who to contact for help, education bullets, etc.

Other topic-specific key points and strategy ideas:

**Table 1: The new norms at BHS of dating -- the hook-up culture, and the impact on student mental health**

- The current hook-up culture has a major impact on students' self-esteem, self-image, status (popular vs. unpopular), reputation (double standards), and decision-making. There is often social pressure to hook up when teens don't really want to, and what happens outside school becomes part of the school "fishbowl."
- Most teens don't think of oral sex as "sex," but even with oral sex, they need to think about STIs.

- The older teens get, the more pressure there is to hook up, and the longer they have been hooking up, the more pressure they are under to go further.
- Assemblies like “Yellow Dress” are very powerful and persuasive.

**Table 2: The impact of social media**

- Posting online can negatively affect others’ perceptions of you.
- Kids often get pressured to send sexually-oriented photos via social media. These can then get forwarded to unintended recipients, causing great embarrassment and possible legal trouble. Sexting can be especially problematic with apps like Snapchat, in which send a photo out for 1-10 seconds of viewing before it disappears. However, teens need to know that receivers can snap a screen shot to keep a photo longer and pass it on to others. We need to get teens to adopt a more respectful attitude about themselves and others so this is not an issue.
- Health class could be used as a way to get the word out to kids on safe online practices and consequences.
- Having older kids talk to younger kids is very effective.

**Table 3: The impact of TV, videos, movies, music, etc. on teen sexuality**

- Parents need to be aware that media causes teens to develop perceptions that are often inaccurate and unrealistic. There is a huge link between violence and sexuality in the media, and it can negatively impact how teens feel about themselves and the pressure to engage in risky behavior.
- The internet is always available and not always a credible source of information.
- Teens should be mindful of how they dress, and the dress code should be examined and clarified -- expectations can affect classroom behavior if kids are unclear and teachers are judgmental about what’s appropriate. Watch out for the double standard.
- Music is a big influence on teens, though they don’t always realize what message is being conveyed.
- Teens have to take responsibility for their own media usage -- how often they’re using the phone, how much time they’re spending online, posting only material of which parents would approve, etc.

**Table 4: The role of parents**

- It is often difficult for parents to deal with their teens’ emerging sexuality.
- Parents need to be aware of the unintended messages their words and actions may convey to their teens – male and female – regarding expectations about relationships, appearance, behavior, gender roles, etc.
- Parents may not want their kids to date or don’t like the person they’re dating. Conversely, parents may be pushing kids to date, creating an uncomfortable disconnect.
- Teens often experience confusion and stress due to conflicts between family values and the current teen culture.
- Though parents should clarify values and set appropriate rules, they need to be willing to constantly adjust for maturation. Kids need room to develop their own personal values.
- Parents should communicate early, often, and clearly, but respect where a teenage is at the moment and be ready to back off if a teen is not ready to discuss a given topic.
- Remember -- all that parents want is for their children to be safe.
- Help teen find an older, wiser friend/relative to talk to openly about experiences/questions a parent might have trouble hearing – or be inclined to punish.
- Create a “tour of resources” so kids know exactly where to go for different issues.

**Table 5: Teen dating violence and sexual assault prevention/safety**

- Teen dating violence occurs with alarming frequency. It is NOT a rite of passage and needs to be addressed with teens BEFORE college, where sexual assault is rampant.
- BHS kids talk about it but don't know who to go to, so we need to publicize adult figures who can help with these situations.
- The programming for Domestic Violence Awareness Week is good, but we need more initiatives, like Walk a Mile in her Shoes, Take Back the Night, etc. and extend beyond one week.
- Be aware how much of this is exacerbated by the media.
- The perpetuation of the rape culture starts as early as middle school with "slut shaming" girls who mature quickly, or are especially outgoing and social. "She deserved it" must be counteracted.
- Too many women deny harassment issues to protect their families.
- We need to better educate boys not to commit sexual assault, like the EMERGE program in Cambridge.

**Table 6: LGBTQ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer)**

- Kids who identify as LGBTQ experience increased bullying, depression and substance abuse.
- Making a declaration (i.e. "I am gay") should not close the door on conversation, nor should kids be pushed into making a declaration. There is some fluidity and exploration for many kids during identity formation, so grownups should be careful of labeling and imparting any sense of judgment, stigma.
- Foster awareness and understanding of sexuality and gender identification as a spectrum (not just gay/straight, male/female). A lot of kids identify as "questioning."
- Help popularize the lingo involved. Advocate for use of appropriate pronouns for transgender kids and queer friendly signage.
- In conversation, try to be gender inclusive and not pigeon hole anyone. For example, instead of asking, "Do you have a boyfriend?" try, "Do you have a partner?"
- Be mindful that the concept of family has changed, with same sex parents more and more common.
- One way to facilitate conversation is if a family has loving relationships with people on the LGBTQ spectrum.
- Faith communities can play a part in urging acceptance and understanding.
- More concrete education and support at the elementary schools, starting earlier with an opportunity to ask questions and get basic info, perhaps involving Peers Leaders.
- Health education needs to cover safe sex for gay kids.
- It's hard for kids to know who are safe grownups with whom to share sensitive confidences, ask questions. Similarly, a lot of parents might feel alone, isolated, and not know who to reach out to, especially in the lower grades. It would be helpful to foster places/ways to connect, to create a list of teachers, students, and parents willing to be identified with LGBTQ issues as sources of support and guidance.
- We could systematically define Brookline as a "welcoming community," like many religious organizations do. (The Unitarians, for example, have a very specific protocol for developing a church into a "welcoming congregation.")
- Some kids in middle school aren't ready to come out, define their sexual orientation, etc. and may not even want to speak to anyone at this point in their lives. We could devise ways to publicize a list of websites that are "safe" for kids to get information, perhaps as part of the middle school health curriculum.
- Another middle school strategy could involve rebranding health education as "wellness" and update the format with seminars, etc. to be more current.

- Institutionally, the system could provide more specific guidelines around LGBTQ bullying and take more steps to insure safety. (Consider more safe, accessible bathrooms, locker rooms, etc.)
- The GTSA could beef up its curriculum to include more outreach.

**Table 7: Sexual decision-making**

- Parents need to weigh in about aspects of sexuality like the meaning of relationships, readiness, responsibility, etc.
- Teens need to practice making healthy decisions and feel confident about their ability before getting into a relationship – ask themselves “Is this safe? Potentially embarrassing?”
- Teens need to be reminded of the risks of sexual activity.
- Teens need to fully understand what it means to give consent – it needs to be mutual, sober, awake, enthusiastic, and verbal, no mixed messages.
- Kids and adults need to be aware of legal ramifications for underage and nonconsensual sex.
- Alcohol impairs judgment and can cause teens to engage in sexual activity that they wouldn’t have had they been sober.
- Teens need to share the power to define boundaries in a relationship.
- In the current culture, there is a lack of clear definitions about relationships. Teens worry about being labeled, that once they have “gone so far” with other person, they have given that person “rights” or power over them.
- Adults should model healthy relationships.