

MINDING THE GENDER GAP: What about our Boys?

The recent series of articles in the New York Times and elsewhere has highlighted some of the emerging data about social indicators of success for American teenage boys. The gender gap is also apparent in medicine and contributes to health problems for our sons. Boys have higher mortality rates than girls and they engage in significantly more dangerous risk-taking behaviors. In spite of this, adolescent males are seen far less by doctors and health professionals than girls. When they are seen, the visit is often a perfunctory sports physical in a school gym, affording little privacy and no legitimate health assessment.

How is that possible? And what does that have to do with success and boys? The hallmark of adolescent medicine is the recognition that what makes teens unhealthy is not Strep throat or broken bones or even the occasional concussion but rather exposure to excessive drinking; unsafe or unethical sexual practices; stresses related to growth, academic life, puberty and body issues; and unsafe driving and sports playing.

As a parent of four young men and as a provider of adolescent health care, I would offer the following ten major areas that each teenage boy deserves to explore with his doctor or other health care provider. Ask your teenage boy if he has ever had a chance to discuss any of these issues with an adult health care provider.

THE TEN HOT QUESTIONS FOR TEENAGE BOYS

1. *Let's talk about the role of supplements, vitamins, energy drinks and performance enhancers in your life. Have you ever tried to do anything to change your body? How much do you exercise? Have you ever tried creatine? Do you take protein supplements? How often do you use Red Bull or other energy drinks to stay "charged?"*
2. *Maybe you aren't sure yet, but on the spectrum of gay or queer to straight, where do you see yourself?*
3. *Tell me about your alcohol experience. How often do you have four or more drinks in one evening? How often do you forget what you did the night before? Have you been in trouble with friends, family, school, the law or even yourself because of alcohol? Do you know what to do if a friend passes out?*
4. *Do you know how to do a Testicular Self Exam (TSE)? Do you ever do it? Boys are more vulnerable to testicular cancer than girls are yet we pay more attention to girls' breast exams than we do to boys' TSE. You deserve better.*
5. *If you are having intercourse, are you using a condom every time? Do you know what to do if you have a condom malfunction? Have you ever heard of Emergency Contraception (aka the Morning After Pill)? Do you know what HPV is? Do you know that there is a new vaccine coming out that may protect you from this virus?*

6. Have you ever been in a *sexual situation that you regretted*?

7. *Are you a smoker?* Most smokers would like to quit. Would you? Do you know how? Are you really ready?

8. Do you have any questions *about your body*—either the way it looks, how you are growing or the way it works?

9. *What stresses you most* and how have you learned to handle stress? What do you do to relax? What seems to work best?

10. *Is there anyone in your life*--friends, family, peers—who worries you particularly? Anyone have an eating disorder, a drinking problem, a problem with anger management?

Almost all boys--when given a chance to speak openly, without judgment and with confidentiality assured--will talk about themselves. They will move beyond the stereotypical one word answer or shrug and share some of the details of their lives. In so doing, they establish a connection to an adult who is willing to understand them in their subtlety and uniqueness. A skilled interview is a dynamic process of give and take and is often the first step to motivating change.

When the concerns of boys are taken as seriously as those of girls, we as a culture will begin to pave the way for them to be healthy and flourish along side their sisters.