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Challenging Casanova: Moving beyond the notion that “boys just want sex”

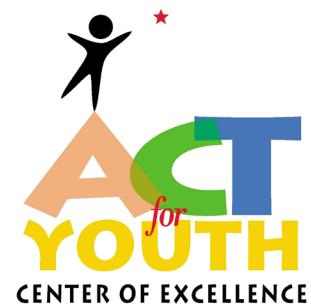
by Andrew Smiler, PhD

According to popular culture, teenage boys want sex, not relationships. They don't care with whom, where, or when it happens, as long as it doesn't require any kind of emotional commitment or relationship. This image is so embedded in our culture that it's the default presentation of many male rap performers in their music videos and it's got its own (sub) genre of films. It's the primary, if not only, depiction of male sexuality in abstinence-only education (Santelli et al., 2006). This image is damaging to boys, and acceptance of the behaviors that go along with it harms both boys and girls. We can do better.



Why do we need a different image of male sexuality?

There are several problems with this image of young men's sexuality. First, it's true only for a minority of boys (Smiler, 2013). Even though only about 15 - 20% of boys have three or more partners in any given year (Dariotis et al., 2008; Humblet, Paul, & Dickson, 2003), we expect most, if not all, boys to be highly promiscuous. In essence, we tell the majority of boys they're not normal. Instead of validating their desire for sexual contact within a relational context, we send boys the message that they're somehow atypical. Girls are also taught that this image of male sexuality is the norm, and thus encouraged to develop a “defensive sexuality” (Tolman, 2002) that focuses on controlling boys' sexuality instead of attending to their own sexual preferences, interests, and pleasures.



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Andrew Smiler, PhD is the author of Challenging Casanova: Beyond the stereotype of the promiscuous young male. His sexuality research focuses on normative aspects of sexual development. He also studies definitions of masculinity, including “jocks,” “rebels,” and “nerds.” Follow him @AndrewSmiler.

For more on normative sexual development among boys, see Young Men's Sexuality: What's Typical? by Andrew Smiler: www.actforyouth.net/resources/rf/rf_young-men_0913.pdf

Casanovas, or players, are typically depicted as having exciting sex lives that don't have any negative consequences: they rarely get anyone pregnant or get sexually transmitted infections (STI), nor do they worry about these things (Hust, Brown, & L'Engle, 2008). To the extent that media influences boys' understanding of reality, they're getting the wrong message about risk. In reality, guys who have multiple partners per year are at the greatest risk for causing an unplanned pregnancy or contracting an STI (Humblet et al., 2003). Like girls, boys who become parents prior to completing high school are less likely to graduate or obtain a GED, more likely to be imprisoned by age 26, and have lower earnings through age 37 (Dariotis, Pleck, Astone, & Sonenstein, 2011).

Although the Casanova stereotype is solidly entrenched in our culture, parents and those who work with youth can help boys resist its influence.

Shifting from “The Talk” to “The Conversation”

In order to combat this view of male sexuality among boys, we need to help them understand what sexuality means to themselves and to others. Given the topic's breadth, as well as its connections to values, identity, and behavior, the notion of a one-time parental “Talk” about sex makes little sense. We need to think instead of a “Conversation” that occurs over several years. As a boy's cognitive abilities develop, the number of topics should expand and the level of detail should get deeper.

Preteens and teens are exposed to a wide variety of sexual content across all media formats, and evidence indicates that about one-third of boys intentionally view online pornography prior to age 14 (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008). This means media literacy about sexuality is key. Questions like “what would you do in that situation?” and “what other options are there?” are important for preparing adolescents for situations they might experience. Teens may lack the breadth of experience to answer broad questions like “is that realistic?,” but asking specific questions about potential consequences (e.g., “is there any risk of pregnancy?”) or what is (not) happening (“e.g., shouldn't they be talking about protection?”) may be useful. Asking about other activities the couple aren't doing (e.g., “weren't they supposed to be doing X? Will Y be mad they haven't done what they promised?”) may help teens think about balancing sexual activity against other activities.

Sexuality can also be addressed through efforts to help teens explore their values. This has clear benefits: teens who know their parents' sexual values or have closer parent-child relationships tend to be older at first sex and have fewer total partners (Deptula, Henry, & Schoeny, 2004; Halpern, Waller, Spriggs, & Hallfors, 2006; Killoren,

Sexual Health Resources for Youth

ACT Youth Network

Designed for youth, this ACT for Youth website includes sections on relationships and sexual health.

www.nysyouth.net

Planned Parenthood Info for Teens

Planned Parenthood answers common questions from youth on this extensive site
www.plannedparenthood.org/info-for-teens/

Sex, Etc.

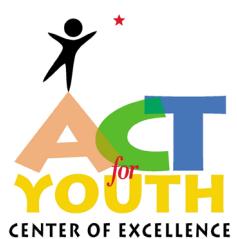
Produced by teens for teens, this Rutgers University site covers all aspects of sexual health and relationships. Youth can ask questions directly by joining a Sex, Etc. forum.

<http://sexetc.org/>

TeensHealth

This comprehensive site for youth from Nemours includes a section on sexual health.

http://teenshealth.org/teen/sexual_health/



Updegraff, & Christopher, 2011; Miller, Norton, Fan, & Christopherson, 1998; Romo, Lefkowitz, Sigman, & Au, 2002; see also Fisher, 2004).

There are a few things the conversation does NOT need to include.

For one, skip the vague analogies and be as specific as possible. It may be embarrassing, but kids need accurate information. Be clear about what you know and what you don't know, and be willing to find out information that youth are seeking or direct them to a reliable resource. Finally, the conversation does not need to be exclusively between two guys; although a minority of boys have a clear preference for a same-sex parent or other adult male, boys say the quality of the relationship is more important than that person's gender (Jeffries, 2004; see reviews by Dilorio, Pluhar, & Belcher, 2003; Fisher, 2004).



Talk and teach about relationships

Most boys prefer their sexual experiences to occur within the context of a romantic relationship (Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010), and most boys will have their first kiss and first romantic relationship by or at age 16 (Fiering, 1996; Smiler, Frankel, & Savin-Williams, 2011). Boys hear much less than girls do about relationship dynamics from the adults in their lives or their preferred media; no wonder girls are considered the “relationship experts.” Combined with the idea that “guys should wear the pants” and make the decisions, that’s a recipe for disaster.

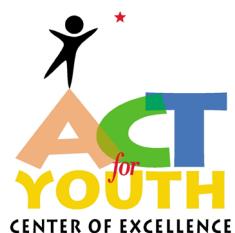
Friendship and romantic relationships require many of the same interpersonal skills. Trust, intimacy, connection, and emotional sharing are central to friendship (Pollack, 1998; Way, 2011). Boys certainly know who really “has their back” and who is less likely to support them, just as they know who will genuinely keep their secrets and who’s likely to spill the beans. Asking boys to clarify how they know who’s a best friend, who’s a friend, and who’s just an acquaintance will give them a finer-grained understanding of relationship dynamics than is typical. So will asking them how they know which secrets are genuinely secret and which ones are meant to be shared or acted upon.

The sporting world routinely talks about relationships, although rarely under that term. Pay attention, and you’ll hear discussions of respect, trust, and liking among coaches and players. Loyalty, past performance, and future goals are big topics during contract negotiations. These issues also appear in the world of music, although less frequently. And celebrity news is full of the latest hookups and breakups. Discussion of these mainstream media figures will help boys learn about relationship dynamics and give them a better framework for understanding what’s relevant for decisions to start, maintain, or end a romantic relationship.

Helping Youth Build Relationship Skills

ACT for Youth has compiled links to program activities and curricula that focus on developing emotional and social competence, with a special focus on teen dating relationships. Resources for youth are also included:

www.actforyouth.net/health_sexuality/sexual_health/community/adulthood/relationships.cfm



Talk and teach about masculinity

We've spent the last several decades examining and discussing femininity, but there has been much less academic and public attention to masculinity. That's starting to shift, but conversations about the meaning of masculinity with -- or among -- boys are still rare.

Guys who "buy in" to stereotypes about masculinity and femininity are less likely to use condoms, more likely to believe contraception is her responsibility, and more likely to believe that relationships are adversarial (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993). They also tend to believe that getting someone pregnant helps a guy prove his masculinity (Marston & King, 2006). Without deconstructing masculinity, asking about his financial responsibility for a child may help him rethink condom use. His desire to be independent -- and thus not bound to this child or girlfriend for another two decades -- may also be persuasive. Asking why he needs to "live up to" cultural standards of masculinity and who is encouraging those standards may also open up a conversation about gender roles.



Talk and teach about how to refuse sex

According to stereotype, boys always want sex. Sure, guys may decline when they're sick or completely exhausted, but other than that, they're expected to say "yes." Boys need to be told that guys can say "no," "not yet," or "slow down" and that doing so doesn't make them less of a man. It's important that girls also understand this and respect their partners' decisions, just as they want their own decisions respected.

Talk and teach about condoms and other forms of protection

Condoms are very effective at preventing both pregnancy and disease. They're also the only form of birth control that is designed to be used by guys, and thus can give them a sense of control. The research tells us that boys whose parents talk to them about condoms before the boys have their first sexual experience are more likely to use condoms that first time and every time after (K.S. Miller, Levin, Whitaker, & Xu, 1998). School-based condom education works and has long-term effects. One national study found that adult men who had been taught in school how to use condoms were more likely to have been tested for an STI and less likely to have been diagnosed with one (Dodge, Reece, & Herbenick, 2009).

Ultimately, there are many ways to help boys understand that they're allowed -- and perhaps even entitled -- to challenge stereotypical notions

of male sexuality. Help them understand that players are a minority of the population so they feel more comfortable violating the expected norms. Start an ongoing conversation that helps them understand their sexual risks, challenges media images, enhances their understanding of relationships, explores their notions of masculinity, permits them to refuse sex, and encourages them to use condoms. Their greater knowledge will allow them to be themselves instead of conforming to a stereotype.★

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Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research
Beebe Hall • Cornell University • Ithaca, New York 14853
607.255.7736 • act4youth@cornell.edu
www.actforyouth.net
www.nysyouth.net

