

Parents & Kids, Talking About Sex ©

Tackling Tough Topics - CONDOM CONFUSION

What should parents say to their children?

Children have both asked and unasked questions about condoms. Parents have an opportunity and a responsibility to teach children how to make informed moral judgments; choices based on sound moral teaching. Before alerting children to the misinformation inherent in the “safe sex” message, parents have an opportunity to help children appreciate God’s gift of sexuality. Church teachings on condoms are rooted in God’s revelation of His creation of the human person and His gift of human sexuality; they are not controlled by statistics.

Children need help in understanding that our bodies are a gift from God and that “*Human sexuality is thus a good, part of that created gift which God saw as being ‘very good,’ when he created human persons in his image and likeness, and ‘male and female he created them’ (Gen 1:27) (The Truth and the Meaning of Human Sexuality, The Pontifical Council for the Family, 1995).* This helps the child appreciate that we act like God when we love. Our bodies are visible images of God when they express or do loving acts. God created us male and female so we could love in and through our bodies in the sacrament of marriage.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) teaches that in marriage “*The spouses’ union achieves the twofold end of marriage: the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life (CCC #2363).*” The use of condoms and other forms of contraception “hold back” fertility. Since the act of intercourse is not open to new life, it no longer reflects the creative plan of God. Because condoms and other forms of contraception reject the possibility of transmitting new life, their use is contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Any discussion about the use of condoms and other forms of artificial birth control must be carried out in the context of this objective moral teaching (CCC #2360-2372)

Catechesis on Human Sexuality, Guidelines for Catholic Schools and Parish Religious Education Programs assert, “*No program offering a “safe sex” or “safer sex” message is acceptable in any Catholic educational program in the Archdiocese of Washington (p. 35).*” The church teaches that abstinence outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage are the only morally acceptable ways to prevent the spread of AIDS.

“Safe Sex”: Fact or Fiction?

The “safe sex” message that is part of many AIDS prevention programs raises important moral and medical issues about condom use. Students are understandably confused about condoms. Do they protect from STDs/HIV? Is there any such thing as “safe-sex”? Children are told that condoms are “98% effective.” But of course, this is the *theoretical* and not the *user effectiveness* rate. Too often the only message children hear is that a pregnancy, the beginning of a new life, is a “condom failure.” In truth, parents can help children by teaching them God’s plan for sexuality and then explaining the facts behind condom effectiveness in preventing STDs/HIV.

The media’s message is that you are “responsible” if you use a condom. Since children hear these public discussions, they need more accurate information from their parents. As early as 4th grade boys will ask, “Do I need to wear a condom when I grow up and have sex?” And 4th grade girls will want to know, “What is a condom?” “Why are condoms different colors?” and “How do you **protect** yourself when you have sex?”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, second edition, 2000 - St Charles Borromeo Catholic Church’s website, www.scborromeo.org/ccc.htm, allows users to search the catechism.

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The True or False statements below convey beliefs children often express about condom use. Parents can use this format to give children the truth about condoms, pregnancy and STD/HIV risk. Most important, parents should stress condoms are NOT “protection.” A very serious risk remains.

- 1. Condoms are “protection” because they’re 98% effective. FALSE**
98% refers only to the *theoretical effectiveness* rate in preventing pregnancy if condoms are used consistently and correctly every time. The implied 2% failure rate gives many a false sense of security. The actual *user effectiveness* rate is 83.5% because 16.5 % of 15 to 19 year olds get pregnant during the first year of condom use.¹ Ask your child, “If you were buying a car, would you want theoretical gas mileage or REAL user gas mileage?”
- 2. The 2% failure rate for condoms refers to their failure in preventing both pregnancy and STD/HIV infection. FALSE**
The condom failure rate is for pregnancy, not STD/HIV infection. One reason the rate is lower for pregnancy is that a woman can get pregnant only during part of her monthly cycle. Condom failures at other times are not counted. The STD/HIV risk is much greater than the pregnancy risk as any condom failure may result in an infection.
- 3. The STD/HIV infection risk is only 2% when condoms are used? FALSE**
The risk is actually 50% - condoms reduced the risk of Gonorrhea by almost 50%,² which suggests the infection rate when condoms are used is much higher. Gonorrhea & HIV can both be spread by infected sperm and vaginal fluids.
- 4. Only gay men and injecting drug users have to worry about HIV/AIDS. FALSE**
Women make up one quarter of all new HIV/AIDS infections. Heterosexual contact is the source of 80% of these infections (CDC 2007).³
- 5. Condoms are highly effective in preventing infection with herpes simplex (genital herpes) and genital warts (human papillomavirus - HPV). FALSE**
Genital herpes and HPV infections can still occur when condoms are used. Condoms only cover the penis and these infections spread by skin-on-skin contact - skin not covered by the condom.⁴
- 6. Unless the condom breaks everything is OK. FALSE**
Sixty-one percent of the women who used condoms reported an error - 38% broke, 5% leaked, 22% slipped off, 5% inside out, 1% reused, 15% sex before, 6% sex after.⁵
- 7. Condoms can be damaged and increase the risk of STD/HIV infection. TRUE**
Latex condoms can be damaged by extremes of heat and cold and oil based lubricants (Vaseline, hand cream and baby oil, etc). This can cause a 90% decrease in condom strength after as little as 60 seconds of exposure increasing the chance of leakage or breakage.
- 8. Abstinence is the only method that is 100% effective in preventing STD/HIV risk. TRUE**

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¹ Trussel J, Koenig JD, Stewart F, et al. (1997). Medical cost savings from adolescent contraceptive use. Family Planning Perspectives, 29: 248-255.

² Rosenberg, M.J., (1992). What’s new in barrier contraceptives: Effectiveness of male and female methods, Paper presented at STD Update ’92, Association of Reproductive Health Professionals, Tysons Corner, VA

³ HIV/AIDS Among Women (2007) - www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/women/resources/factsheets/women.htm

⁴ Male Latex Condoms and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (2001) - www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/latex.htm

⁵ Comparison of STD Prevalence by Reported Condom Use Errors in 100% Condom Users of an Urban STD Clinic (2002) - www.cdc.gov/stdconference/2002/Slides/b9shlay.pps