

Rethinking Sexual Education with Susan Stiritz, PhD Transcript

When we talk about risk behaviors during the teenage years, three big issues always arise: drinking, drugs, and sex. These three topics are the primary focus of most health educations, and they get lumped together in study after study on adolescent risk-taking. After reading papers upon papers about adolescent risk, even I have begun to associate these three things in my head as dangerous and best avoided.

But, of course, there's a problem with this triad: in the adult world, drinking and drugs are not even remotely associated with the same types of risks as sex. Unlike drugs and alcohol, sex isn't actually a bad thing. In fact, sex is arguably the most important thing we do in a lifetime, from a biological standpoint, because it is how we reproduce and propagate the human species. We may cringe to think about it, but the reason why each of us is here on this planet is because, once upon a time, a sperm fertilized an egg, and that egg turned into us.

Not only is sex biologically necessary, but it's also a healthy and pleasurable activity when performed safely. It is the cornerstone of intimacy in adult relationships, and study after study shows that sex is a critical factor in determining a person's emotional and physical health.

During puberty, as our bodies are primed for sexual reproduction, our brains also go through a period of sexualization, culminating in a heightened sex drive that peaks at about age 18. By the time an adolescent is 12 years old, they've already begun the neurobiological journey through sexual maturation and longing. This is perfectly healthy and normal, as is desiring sexual intercourse at age 16. By all biological and emotional accounts, it's crazy to identify sex as merely a risk behavior during the teenage years. Of course STIs and teenage pregnancy are negative outcomes of sexual intercourse, but sex can also be positive in the later adolescent years.

For this reason, I spent an afternoon speaking with Dr. Susan Stiritz of Washington University, who teaches undergraduates about sexuality and sexual education. Though this discussion is not focused on the brain, per se, it speaks to the necessity of lining up our cultural and educational approaches to sexuality with our neurobiological realities. Here's our conversation now.

Highlights from Discussion with Susan Stiritz

- Sexual development does not really begin at puberty, but even as early as during fetal development. However, puberty is typically the time when sexual desires turn towards members of the preferred sex, and when romantic ideation begins.

- The trajectory of a person's sexual development is largely determined by their culture. For this reason, psychosexual maturation is highly dependent on a person's race, class, and religious background.
- Dr. Stiritz mentions Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, and how the various psychological crises of different age periods affects our sexual development. You can find more about Erikson's work on the episode page.
- Millennials actually have less sexual intercourse, on average, than the generations preceding them (millennials are people born from about 1980 to 1996. Those of us born after this window are actually part of Generation Z, and our adult sexual statistics have yet to come out.) Dr. Stiritz postulates that many adult millennials have less intercourse than previous generations because of the portrayal of sex as bad and taboo in our culture, specifically for young women.
- In both boys and girls, it is normal to begin sexual experimentation with the same sex, even if a person is completely heterosexual. Many people report sexual experiences with same-sex friends around the time of puberty. This does not indicate homosexuality, and is a normal part of development.
- All in all, Dr. Stiritz is a proponent of open, gender-inclusive, and sex-positive sexual education. From her research, she has found that the most sexually responsible and happy college students are well educated about sex and know how to have conversations about sex with potential sex partners. The best thing we can do to guarantee our own safety and happiness is to learn more about our sexual development, whether that means turning to parents, friend, or the Internet (find reliable sites on this episode page.)