

Torrington case puts teen sex in spotlight

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TORRINGTON – Think your teenager isn't sexually active? Think again.

A new study to be published next month in the medical journal "Pediatrics" finds that more than half of all 18 year-olds in the U.S. report having had sexual intercourse. The numbers remain low for children 14 years and younger, according to the study.

With teens likely to be sexually active, parents cannot rely on schools, the Internet or their children's friends to provide adequate information about sex. It is squarely up to parents to do a better job of raising sexually safe and healthy children, according to Janet Rosenzweig, a leading sex educator.

The issue has become front page news in Connecticut with the arrest of four Torrington High School football players who apparently had consensual sex with 13-year-old middle school students. They face charges of statutory rape and the case has opened a window into the issue of sexual activities among teenagers everywhere.

While the sex between the football players and the 13-year-old girls may not have been coerced, it remains illegal because the girls are not considered old enough to knowingly consent. The four high school students face second-degree sexual assault charges and all have been suspended from school. Two have been expelled and at least two are in custody.

The arrests drew national attention after the girls were criticized on social media networks. Students and peers of the four accused boys unleashed derogatory criticism directed at the girls, blaming them rather than the boys.

IN TORRINGTON, THE BOARD OF EDUCATION is planning a series of community forums next month to discuss issues such as rape, parental responsibility and the new, invasive role of social media. Kenneth Traub, chairman of the board said cyberbullying and safe and responsible sex are also likely topics.

The forthcoming "Pediatrics" study notes that adolescence is a time of rapid physical and emotional change where sexual activity has become more common among older teens, including one-third of those aged 16,

nearly half of those aged 17, 61 percent of 18-year-olds and 71 percent of 19-year-olds.

The statistics are nothing new. The study notes that this pattern has “prevailed for decades: A low level of sexual activity among young adolescents has long been the norm, while sexual initiation later in adolescence has been and remains a normal part of teens’ development process.”

With that, parents cannot assume their job is over once they tell their young son or daughter where babies come from, Rosenzweig said.

She is the author of the book “The Sex-Wise Parent” and has worked in areas of child abuse prevention, sexuality education and family service. She has also served as a consultant in the Penn State abuse case involving the former coach Jerry Sandusky.

She noted that many parents became timid about discussing sex with their children after a decade she refers to as the “neutered 90s.”

THE 1990S WAS A TIME when sex education became “squelched” and public health officials were silenced, particularly former U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders, who was fired after answering a question about masturbation. Elders said masturbation is “part of human sexuality” and “should be taught.”

“When well-meaning and well-trained health educators are no longer in a position to be teaching about sexuality, it really leaves a vacuum,” Rosenzweig said. That vacuum has been filled by the media, children’s peers, and eventually the Internet.

Rosenzweig said parents need to do a better job of helping their children understand how their bodies work and how the bodies of the opposite gender work.

Children prefer to learn about sex from their parents, rather than their friends or the Internet, according to a 2012 survey of teens.

The survey notes that teenagers say parents most influence their decisions about sex.

The survey, “With One Voice 2012,” found that nearly nine in 10 teenagers say it “would be easier for them to delay sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations” about sex.

But parents may not recognize that because the Internet gives them a false sense of security – that their kids will get the information they need about sex through search engines and blog posts, Rosenzweig said. “What (teenagers) can’t Google is their parents’ values,” Rosenzweig said. “What their parents want them to know – that sex and love go together.”

The “Pediatrics” study found that sex among younger children – 10 to 15 – is less than 8 percent. More importantly, a large number of those younger children were coerced.

THE STUDY FOUND THAT 62 PERCENT OF FEMALES who had sex by age 10 said they were coerced, as did 50 percent of by age 11. Many advocates for women would put the coercion number at 100 percent, believing that children at that age are simply incapable of “consent.”

The “Pediatrics” study used data from the National Survey of Family Growth for the years 2006 to 2010. The U.S. National Center for Health Statistics conducted the survey.

The authors, Lawrence B. Finer and Jesse M. Philbin of the Guttmacher Institute, argue that coerced sex needs serious attention by pediatricians and adolescent health professionals.

The authors also say that teaching adolescents about contraception before they become sexually active, and making methods available in advance of an adolescent’s first experience will improve health outcomes.

Rosenzweig’s work now centers on sexual violence against children and has been the focus of her efforts at Penn State where the community is still reeling from the molestation and rape of at least 10 boys by Sandusky, a former assistant football coach.