

ROUNDTABLE

SEX TALK

Jenny Sinding Bradbury

and Kate Sinding

Christina Pasparakis

Valentina Barroso Graziano

Angela María Barraza Mejía

WE ASKED SEVERAL CHILDREN OF LEADING reproductive rights activists to tell us about their experiences discussing sex and sex education with their parents. We asked them how their own values were formed and what that means when they talk to others, either their peers or the next generation. Did their parents' involvement in the movement make a difference to how they dealt with and deal with the issue? Some of the responses we received follow.

Committed to Embracing Sexuality

By Jenny Sinding Bradbury and Kate Sinding



Over the past 10 years, **JENNY SINDING BRADBURY** has taught high school English and humanities in the US and abroad. She currently lives with her beloved husband and cats in Northampton, Mass., where she works as a writer and editor.

KATE SINDING is a partner in a New York City law firm specializing in environmental and land use matters. She lives with her partner, Dave, in Manhattan.

Their father, Steven Sinding, is the director-general of the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

THE EARLIEST SEX EDUCATION THAT WE received came in the form of an illustrated book for children and parents called *Where Did I Come From?* The drawings and text were simplistic (the experience of sex was likened to being tickled with a feather), and our parents pretty much left the interpretation up to us. Thankfully, we eventually figured out that the naked creatures crawling across the pages were babies, and not piglets as we had originally imagined. The adults pictured were overweight and surprisingly hairy, and the overall effect, whether intentional or not, was to turn both of us off to the idea of sex for years to come.

Although this was the most straightforward sex education we would receive from our parents until we reached adolescence, we learned a great deal about contraception and family planning through less direct routes. We grew up in Pakistan and the Philippines, countries with extreme poverty exacerbated by overpopulation, and this gave us a visceral, firsthand understanding of the importance of access to reproductive health care. Our parents would frequently travel to the sites of development projects, and they would almost invariably return with a variety of condom-inspired trinkets, from key chains to T-shirts to board games. Talk around our dinner table also focused on these and other prophylactics, and they soon became a casual, comfortable topic of conversation.

When we moved to Kenya as teenagers in the 1980s, the country had the fastest rate of population growth in the world. On a daily basis, we observed the dire consequences of lack of access to basic resources and of fundamental human rights, including education and reproductive choice. By this time, we were becoming old enough to appreciate the complex social dynamics that con-

tribute to overpopulation, and we both became determined to help improve women's rights and access to family planning. Later, Kate would intern at the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy, which would inspire her to become a lawyer, and Jenny would work on clinic defense projects for the Feminist Majority Fund and Foundation.

As teenagers we were ready for more direct conversations with our parents about our reproductive responsibilities and choices. Because we knew far more than average about condoms, diaphragms, IUDs and so forth, these talks primarily involved our parents' assurances of support should we want advice or help in procuring contraception. After taking them up on one such offer, Kate became a guinea pig for the then-novel Norplant device.

We feel committed to being as open and honest with our children as our parents were with us, yet, looking back, we are struck by how technical our education was. We often talked, or listened to talk, about the nuts and bolts of birth control, but we rarely discussed relationships. Perhaps this was because our parents took a particularly technical view of reproductive issues, as a result of their profession. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that they were products of the 1950s, when sexuality was a more taboo subject. Perhaps it resulted from the difficulty that parents and children have in discussing sex, because it is so personal and parents are generally the last people with whom teenagers want to discuss it.

We had to figure out for ourselves how to deal with peer pressure, talk to partners about our needs and desires, and determine when we felt emotionally ready to become sexually active. Today, in an increasingly sex-obsessed youth culture that includes such productions as *Girls Gone Wild*, discussion of these topics appears both more complicated and more critical. Despite what are sure to be some awkward moments around our dinner tables, we are committed to helping our children understand and embrace their sexuality. ■

Never a Taboo

By Christina Pasparakis

CHRISTINA PASPARAKIS is a sophomore at the University of Miami majoring in biology and marine science. She aspires to a career in environmental policy or women's and reproductive rights. Her mother, Valerie DeFillipo, is director of external affairs at the International Planned Parenthood Federation in London.



WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I was always the go-to girl when it came to sex. All of my friends knew that I was knowledgeable on the subject, and neither ashamed nor afraid to talk about it. Sex has never been a taboo subject for me, and I grew up learning that sex was both a natural and beautiful process. My mother, a very empowered and opinionated woman, made sure that her only daughter grew up knowing

that sex was neither scary nor disgusting. At the same time, she made sure I was aware of the emotional and physical danger of having sex too early or with the wrong people. My mother never told me stories about birds, bees or storks. Why make up stories when the real stories of conception and childbirth are so interesting?

Knowing conceptually what happens during sex is very different from actually seeing it. I was introduced to recreational sex, on television, in first grade. Before that, I had thought the only purpose of sex was reproduction. While channel surfing, I stopped on an HBO movie where I saw two people having rowdy sex. My mother got up and quickly

changed to Cartoon Network. "They are having sex," she said, "but this is an inappropriate movie for your age." I ran to my bedroom screaming, "Sex is so gross! Now I am never going to have children!" Later that night, my mother came to my room and explained that there was a lot more to sex than I could understand at my age. She told me that having sex was a way for two people in love to express how they feel about each other. I asked her why they couldn't just buy flowers or take each other to a movie. My mother replied, "Sex is more intimate and significant than something you can buy with money."

Although I did not believe her at the time, I grew up being both comfortable and informed about sex, and this has given me the power to stay safe and make the right decisions. I believe abstinence-only education is misguided and dangerous. All teenagers deserve to be educated about sex and its consequences. They deserve to learn about contraception and how to keep themselves protected. Most importantly, they deserve the truth, and it is sad that so many teenagers in the US and around the world are stripped of this fundamental right. I consider myself lucky. ■

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Leading by Example

By Valentina Barroso Graziano

VALENTINA BARROSO GRAZIANO was born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and moved to the US when she was 14. She is a photographer and mixed media artist and owns the Ogle, Inc. gallery in Portland, Ore., where she lives with her husband, Jeremy, their dog and cats. Her mother is Carmen Barroso, the regional director of the Western Hemisphere Region of the International Planned Parenthood Federation.



I LEARNED EARLY TO BE COMFORTABLE with my body, to value a pleasurable and mutually respectful sexuality, to expect and demand an egalitarian relationship, to assert my own needs, and to promote the well-being of others. I grew up in an environment where these principles were taught by

example more than by speeches. There were sex education books throughout our home, and my mother translated parts of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* for me, but this was just part of my education.

My mother worked hard and traveled a lot. This was not easy for her or for the family, but it was clear that she did it because she was committed to a movement and to certain values. She and my father quarreled over this and that, but they clearly enjoyed each other, and had a deep respect for each other's needs. They put me in so-called progressive schools where most of the parents were liberal—but not all of them. Once, the mother of a classmate told my mother how disconcerted she was with my sexual vocabulary—I referred to all parts of the body without

much inhibition. My grandparents also had different attitudes from my parents'. When I was very little, I had difficulty understanding why my grandmother did not let me take showers with her, a thing I routinely did with my parents.

Feminism was a value both at home and in school, sometimes misguided. In nursery school, all boys and girls were required to take judo classes. I simply hated them, and my mother supported me, to no avail. I was able to hold my own:

I tenaciously stayed on the bench at every single class.

On one occasion, a friend of my mother's said—half-jokingly, I was later told—that all males were chauvinists. I was indignant and defended vehemently my father, whom until this day I consider one of the most feminist men I have ever met. He and I had even appeared prominently in a popular magazine, which featured "the new fathers." A photograph of us playing on

the floor illustrated the fact that he had arranged his working hours to be able to have time with me. Chauvinism was a grave offense and not applicable to him at all.

Today I have a beautiful relationship with my husband of seven years. We have not started a family; when we decide to do so, I hope we will create for our child the same loving, life-enriching atmosphere my parents gave me. ■

Owning Our Bodies

By Angela María Barraza Mejía

ANGELA MARIA BARRAZA MEJIA was born in Bogota, Colombia. Her family moved to Mexico when she was 3 and, apart from a year in New York, she has lived there since. She is studying to be an interpreter. Angel's mother, María Consuelo Mejía, is the director of *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* in Mexico.



MY MOTHER'S POSITION in the reproductive rights movement has been a big part of my life. I've always been aware of it, but more so at certain times. In my infancy, I obviously couldn't have known what exactly my mother did for a living, and when in primary school we talked about our parent's jobs, I was unable to explain what she did.

Since she explained to me things that not every boy and girl in my class had heard of, I started noticing that I had different ideas from theirs, along with the problems differences can bring at that age. My mother focused most on explaining respect for other people and the importance of boundaries in social life. I'm grateful for that. Because of my mother,

I can never use the word "fag"; I learned that homosexuals were not to be singled out, unless we were all to start referring to each other by sexual orientation: "Hi, my name is Camille and I am a heterosexual."

My sexual education classes in primary school were supported at home by my mother. I was lucky to be in a very open school. We

was something that two people did when they loved each other. They never said it could be also just for fun; I don't know if that's something a kid can understand.

We learned we were the owners of our bodies, and the only ones who determined what happened to them, and that no one should make us do something that hurt us, or vice versa. We discussed the biology of sexuality: that we shouldn't be ashamed of it, because it was natural. When you're young, you don't care much: Things are simple; you are concerned with feelings as they come. What is complicated is that at the same time, the person you will be for the rest of your life starts developing, and the information you are soaking up will later take on vital importance in your judgments and actions.

It wasn't necessary that my mother explain precisely what she thought for me to understand her point of view. The rest of what I know, and how I feel,

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watched cartoon and live-action videos about what happens to the human body as it reaches puberty and adolescence. The values imparted were suitable for kids: Sex

about sexual and reproductive rights, I've learned by experience. I consider my mother's work something to be proud of. ■