

**PS4-- HOWARD SCHIFFER INTERVIEW, "RAGING HORMONES- IN A SCHIZOID WORLD OF COMPULSORY CHASTITY AND ONLINE ORGIES, HOW ARE TEENAGE BOYS SUPPOSED TO MAKE SENSE OF SEX?", SALON, 5/12/04**

**May 12, 2004 | Howard Schiffer is not the first parent to be alarmed that his teenager was learning about sex from either sniggering peers or a deeply confused culture that veers between sexual repression and Internet "creampie" raunch. But he is one of the few to actually write a book for teenagers about sexuality. "How to Be the Best Lover: A Guide for Teenage Boys" describes how sex can be an ecstatic (and healthy) part of life. A former '60s commune member in Oregon, Schiffer is now -- like so many other boomer parents -- trying to find a middle way between the utopian, and sometimes wrenching, sexual experimentation of his youth and the increasingly puritanical ethos of the Bush era.**

**Schiffer, a wiry, intense, energetic 54-year-old, has three children and is the author of "First Love/Remembrances" and "How to Be a Family: The Operating Manual." He has worked as a midwife and a natural foods vendor. The idea for "How to Be the Best Lover" came to him in 2000, when he noticed his then 13-year-old son displaying clear signs of sexual awareness and development. On a camping trip, his son refused to go swimming and Schiffer writes, "At some point I realized that any movement might have given away the big hard-on" bulging from his son's lap. "Around this time," adds Schiffer, "porn sites started mysteriously appearing on my computer," he says.**

**The book grew out of a series of talks that Schiffer held with his son over a six-month period. He says that since many families approach the obligatory "sex talk" with as much enthusiasm as a visit to the dentist, he hopes parents will use his book as a catalyst for honest discussions, in which they open up as much as their children.**

**Salon discussed "How to Be the Best Lover" with Schiffer at his home in Santa Barbara, Calif.**

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**There are a lot of books on the market that stress committed love, sex and intimacy. Why did you feel there was a need for a book directed at teenagers?**

**There's a big gulf between what I call the "Sex 101" books and the adult books. What's out there for teenagers is elementary anatomy, physiology, birth control and a basic introduction to sex. But I wasn't interested in teaching my son techniques or different positions. I thought it was important to show him how to make the transition from knowing and socializing with girls, to engaging in activities together, to holding hands, to kissing, to touching, to being sexual. I wanted him to see that you don't start off with being sexual.**

**A technique book focuses the message on the sex. I wanted to focus on the relationship and the connection. What's important is the heart, the emotional component, what's involved when you start becoming intimate and taking chances with each other. It's also important that a book for teenagers use language they can relate to. I'm not aware of any such books on the market.**

**What is your overall message to teenage boys about sex?**

**My message is that sex is an amazing thing, and a way that you can get incredibly close to another human being. And it exists on many levels -- emotional, physical and spiritual. And that it comes with certain responsibilities. When I was 14 no one had told me anything. We had these small 4-by-4-inch cartoon porn books we passed around that were just out-and-out smut. Freddy Antonucci, the high school kid down the street, told me that to "do it" you put your thing inside a girl, move it in and out for a couple of minutes and that was it. That's all I knew.**

**For me, all the talk was of sex as this isolated thing. I'm trying to show young boys that it lives in the context of a relationship. Like saying when a girl first starts wanting you to touch her body, that's one level of commitment. When you start actually being sexual, that's a much different level of commitment. Boys shouldn't gossip about it, for example. If somebody's intimate with you, don't go telling all your friends, treating it like a cheap thing. Honor it like it is something special.**

**Next page | "I'm trying to tell young guys that it's all about connection"**

**Your book is mostly about building relationships, and then fitting sex into it. Is your book meant to promote long-lasting relationships?**

**I think it encourages more real and special relationships. My first time was with a girl I didn't even know, I mean I had never even seen her before and after it was over I never saw her again. Afterwards I was left with an empty feeling and an awful experience. The difference between that time and a couple of years later when I had a girlfriend all summer, and we went from talking to walking her home, to holding hands, to kissing, making out and then finally at the end of the summer we ended up being lovers was a world apart. For years I called that experience my first time. I still hold it in a special place in my heart.**

**I'm trying to tell young guys that it's all about connection. I don't think the first sexual experiences necessarily lead to marriage, because it takes a while to find the right person. But I think that it leads to**

**wonderful relationships with people, because you were real with each other. Nobody is discussing how you talk about real issues that come up, how to develop intimacy, what relationship really means.**

**And the message is also that sexual intimacy is really fun. A lot of parents are so afraid of their teenagers getting STDs or AIDS, or getting somebody pregnant, that their message is "just don't do it." But this runs contrary to everything these kids are feeling. Their bodies are telling them this is the direction to go in. And it's much more respectful to them to honor that, to say "Yes, that's what your body is telling you, and this is what the territory looks like. These are the decisions that you're going to face, and if you go in, do so with your eyes and heart open."**

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**Were women involved in writing the book?**

**I wrote the book, though of course my viewpoint is a product of the many women in my life who have been teachers and partners. I sent out the first draft to many women for reactions, and had a teenage "ambassador" for the second one. She contacted many teenagers,**

**after getting their parents' permission, to give me feedback on the language and content.**

**How much of kids' impressions of sex come from the media these days?**

**The media has a tremendous impact on kids' expectations about sexuality and love. A lot of kids think that it's about being swept away into a perfect romantic entanglement. They're disappointed when they have a relationship and find they're not swept off their feet. The media tends to either foster such romantic fantasies, or trivialize sex by presenting it as a subject for jokes and innuendos, or portray it crudely, outside the context of a relationship.**

**The media has done a good job in one area: discussing sexually transmitted diseases and birth control directly. This can help foster a dialogue between parents and kids. But the media's overall poor treatment of sexuality is a high price to pay. I'd like TV programs or movies to show real relationships -- people getting to know one another, finding out likes and dislikes, and gradually progressing to intimacy or ending it because it doesn't feel right. I wish the media would get to the heart side.**

**Isn't advising abstinence the safest course in the age of AIDS?**

**I was shocked to read a study indicating that half of all new HIV cases in the United States are kids between the ages of 13 and 24. But the problem is that studies also show that half the young people who take abstinence vows break them within a year or so. And a lot of them are much more likely to have unprotected and unsafe sex because they don't know what else to do, how else to follow through.**

**A 1995 study, the National Survey of Family Growth, found that 51 percent of kids were sexual by age 17 and that boys and girls are almost equally active. Given figures like this, I'm saying that it's best to give the kids all the information about this territory they're entering so they can make better decisions. I feel there's a strong possibility my son is going to be sexual before he is married, and I'd like it to be**

**in a relationship in which he cares about the person. I'd like it to be something he can actually feel good about and, even if it doesn't work out, where he can still be friends with the girl afterwards.**

**But a lot of parents would say that your approach encourages kids to have sex.**

**Studies of over three dozen sex education programs have shown that the kids who have more information make better decisions, and that increased sex education does not lead to increased or earlier sexual activity. My book is going to give kids real information so they'll make much better decisions. It seeks to help them realize that it's a big decision, and they should not just let their hormones, Internet or television drive them. They should really think about themselves and go at a pace they're really comfortable with.**

**Next page | "The reason this conversation has such a hard time happening is because parents are embarrassed about sexuality"**

**Well, what about the opposite argument? The kind of meaningful, loving, satisfying sex you describe in your book would make anyone happy. Why not actively encourage teenagers to pursue this kind of sex?**

**Because it might not be appropriate for your child. Your child might be shy and really quiet, and 22 or 23 before they feel safe enough for it. It is a very exposing thing to be genuinely sexual with somebody. It takes a lot of self-confidence and self-esteem, and they might not be in that place. If you are encouraging them before they're ready you might create a conflict between trying to meet your expectations and what they really feel good about. So I think you're better off giving them the right information, and encouraging them to wait until they're really ready for it.**

**Did you practice what people today would call "free love" when you lived in your commune as a young man?**

**Oh, definitely. There wasn't AIDS; STDs were not as rampant, and the culture I was in was supporting a sexual revolution. We were willing to make love on a pretty casual level, if there was a bit of connection, or we were friends, or the timing was right.**

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**Is it something you'd want for your kids today?**

**No, because I think there were a lot of problems with the sexual revolution. There was a lot of unconsciousness, for example, kids being born who weren't taken care of properly. We weren't sensitive to each other's feelings; we didn't really check in with our partners. We were operating out of a "should" -- "if it feels good do it" -- rather than an emotional and real point of view. Part of being sexual is opening up your heart, literally exchanging energy, and revealing yourself in a very intimate way to another person. I don't think that it's just a physical act. And my experience was that people do get jealous and hurt, there was a lot of heartache. "Free love" comes with a price. You end up spending a lot of your life trying to sort out who's hurt, who's feeling OK, and whose emotions are getting trampled over in any given day.**

**How do you advocate that teenagers approach sex? What are the stages to go through?**

**The first stage is that you meet them, ideally in some place you're interested in: music, theater, choir, sports. You're not just there to find a girl or a boy. And maybe for the first while, you're involved with that person casually, in group situations. And that might evolve into doing some things together, social things, mutual interests, things that you both find exciting or fun. And that would progress to talking, getting to know the person, getting to understand what's important to them, what they like, paying attention to who they are. And then that might progress to dancing together, social things, and then touching or actually holding hands first, to kissing, to making out.**

**What is important in the first sexual stages?**

**There'll be somebody lying next to you that you care about. Notice how much touch can be transmitted in your fingertips, touch is so important. And kissing. In each of these steps being the best lover is about showing up as a whole person. Don't rush through these steps, don't try to shortchange them. And by the time you want to be sexual with somebody, you will have what you need. You'll be able to talk, you'll know who the person is, you'll know if they like you, you'll be able to ask what they like, to touch them, to kiss them, to not just rush through it.**

**What happens when you're actually considering intercourse?**

**Still go slow, notice how your partner is responding and, very important, have a conversation about each other's sexual history. Ask whether we should both get tested. If either partner is not a virgin, you have to realize it might not be them but someone they have been with that might affect you. Without an AIDS test you're not going to know. And before having sex you should probably go down to a family planning clinic and meet with the people there about birth control options and sexual diseases.**

**Many parents I know assume their kids would never talk to them about sex.**

**I think parents would be surprised at how much their kids are willing to talk to them if they gave them the chance. One survey I read said that 83 percent of kids said their parents were their most trusted and preferred source of information. But the majority also said that they're afraid to talk to their parents because their parents would be so uncomfortable with it.**

**Are you saying parents are more resistant than kids to talking about sex?**

**The reason this conversation has such a hard time happening is because parents are embarrassed about sexuality, because they were never talked to as kids, and it reminds them of how uncomfortable they were as teenagers. And most adults have their own current issues about sexuality. When my son was moving from eighth to ninth grade, I came up with a list of things I felt I had to cover: drugs, alcohol, smoking and sex. The surprising thing for me was that all the other ones were easy, and sex was so hard. I was shocked; I thought, I went through the '60s, what's my problem here? And I realized I'd never been talked to, that it brought me back to when I was a teenager, and that it made me very uncomfortable.**

**So how do you encourage parents to overcome their own squeamishness about the topic?**

**I tell them, You're putting hundreds of hours a year into working for your kids' material well-being. You give them music lessons, driving lessons, tennis lessons. But with relationships and sex we kind of pat them on the head and say, "Good luck, see you!" or we say something like "Find somebody's who's nice to you" or "Be careful and don't get pregnant." Well, teaching your child about relationships and sexuality is the greatest gift you can give them. Nothing is going to be more important to their happiness or, ultimately, your own satisfaction with how you raised them.**

**Next page | "You're looking at somebody who is playing with Legos one day, checking out the girls the next, and then going back to Legos"**

**How should a parent approach the subject?**

**When I show my book to parents, I suggest they read it first. I say, "Think what it was like for you when you grew up, so that you can be honest when you discuss this with your kid. You can say, 'I was really uncomfortable when I was your age, that's one of the reasons I want to talk about it with you.'"**

**Second, it's really important to watch your kid and know the right time to start the conversation, usually between the ages of 11 and 15. A young person's transition to becoming sexual happens over a period of time, and there is a very fine line. You're looking at somebody who is playing with Legos one day, checking out the girls the next, and then going back to Legos the day after. The right time is when they are starting to move into this territory. If you wait too long the wall can go up.**

**Third, and most importantly for the parent, you need to be committed. It will be uncomfortable for you and for your child. So you have to remember that you're doing it for your connection with your child, and to protect them. It's scary out there, and you want them to have the right information so they can make the right choices.**

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**Find a good time to do it, maybe on a Sunday afternoon. Have the place for the talk set up, so it can be quiet and uninterrupted. Set it up maybe for an hour, enough to get into it but not be bored. Maybe be lying down side-by-side with your child, so you're not lecturing at them. Have some kind of a guide that's an entry-level book. Have it be interactive, so each of you takes turns reading. Stop and talk about it. When it starts talking about erections, you could say: "Do you know any other name for erection? I know 'woodies,' 'stiffies' and 'boners.'" And bring in your own experience. You might say, "You know, when I was 13, I remember getting a hard-on when I was at the pool and not being able to move and being so embarrassed."**

**If your son or daughter came to you while in college and said they wanted to celebrate spring break in Cancun, "Real Sex" land, would you pay for their plane ticket?**

**I would advise them not to do that because I think that's a lot of the old model. It's a lot of the old stereotype of girls showing their breasts, shaking their butts, and boys going "yeah, yeah, yeah." Girls drinking beer out of a penis dispenser and everybody going "all right, all right." I wish those models would change. I wish that girls could be really wild and really have a great time sexually, and still be respected, and not have to shake their butts and bare their breasts to get boys' attention. No, I wouldn't pay for my kid's plane ticket.**

**I was interested that you talk a lot in your book about sex being spiritual. As you know, most spirituality advises people to transcend the body and sexuality, looking upon it as a "lower" function. How do you see it?**

**I think it's a sacred act for a women to let you touch her, to let you in, to literally let you into her body. And for you to want to be there 100**

**percent for another person, and to do so without ego, without ulterior motives -- not because you want to be seen going out with the quarterback or head cheerleader.**

**I think there's a transcendency to sexuality that's one of our most intimate ways of connecting with each other as human beings. Transcending the concerns of the everyday world, of what you're going to be doing in school, or your dress or your clothes or how you appear. It's very hard to pretend when you're being sexual with somebody, because there are not that many places to hide. It doesn't mean don't have fun. It just means don't trivialize, minimize or degrade it.**

**I must admit I found words like "hard-on" and "blow job" a bit jarring, particularly in the context of talking about sex as part of a meaningful relationship.**

**Everyone forgets when they were 14 or they get caught in needing to be the "proper" adult now. I know when I was a kid it was all dicks and cocks and tits -- that's how we talked. I can hear myself asking, "Did you get laid last night?" I know I wouldn't have said, "Did you and Karen have intercourse last night?" And in all honesty as an adult now I did feel a bit uncomfortable with the language but also caught. I felt if I was too clinical and used words like "erection" or "fellatio" that I wouldn't be connecting with the kids. I was afraid they'd read it and go yeah, yeah, this is a book for adults. But I also felt that too much crudeness wouldn't be conveying the right message. So I tried to find a middle ground where I could refer to the penis as a "unit" rather than as a "dick" or "cock." The kids I showed it to all said not to change the language, because it wouldn't be real to sanitize it. When teenage boys talk about oral sex, they call it "blow jobs" -- not "oral intercourse."**

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#### **About the writer**

**Fred Branfman is a Santa Barbara, Calif., writer who directs "For Generations to Come" for the Tides Center.**

