

The EMERGING MILLENNIALS

HOW CANADA'S NEWEST GENERATION
IS RESPONDING TO CHANGE & CHOICE

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with Sarah Russell & Ron Rotheiser

Bestselling author of

CANADA'S TEENS and THE BOOMER FACTOR

7. title

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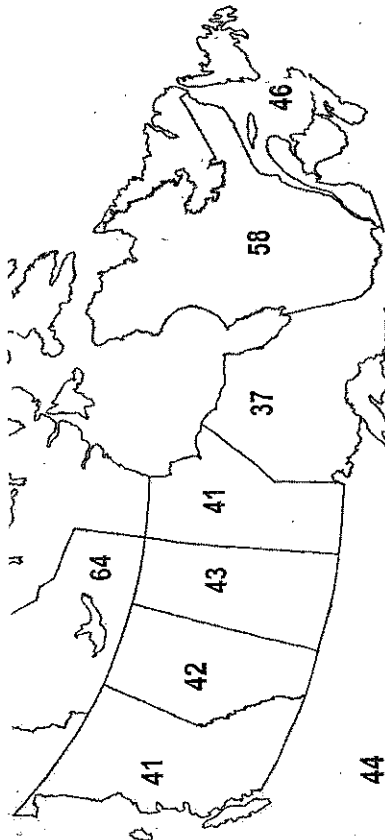
AUTHOR

3 Sexuality Is a Personal Matter -

So what are teens thinking and doing?

"It's all right for people to have sex after a few times together, if they talk about it."
 - a 15-year-old male who lives in suburban Toronto

Teens Who Currently Are Engaging in Sex (%)



44

SEX in the teen years has always been a topic of immense interest to just about everyone. Since the beginning of time, parents and other adults have been well aware that, as young people are leaving their childhood behind, they increasingly will be thinking about, exploring, and engaging in sex. Such realizations on the part of adults, and especially parents, have often been the source of more than a little anxiety and strain. After all, we know what we were like when we were that age. For their part, teenagers have been aware that their bodies have been changing, complete with emerging sexual feelings and sexual attraction. They have been putting together some kind of understanding of it all, and, of course, checking things out. Many teens think they have got things pretty much together sexually by the time they hit twenty - if not before.

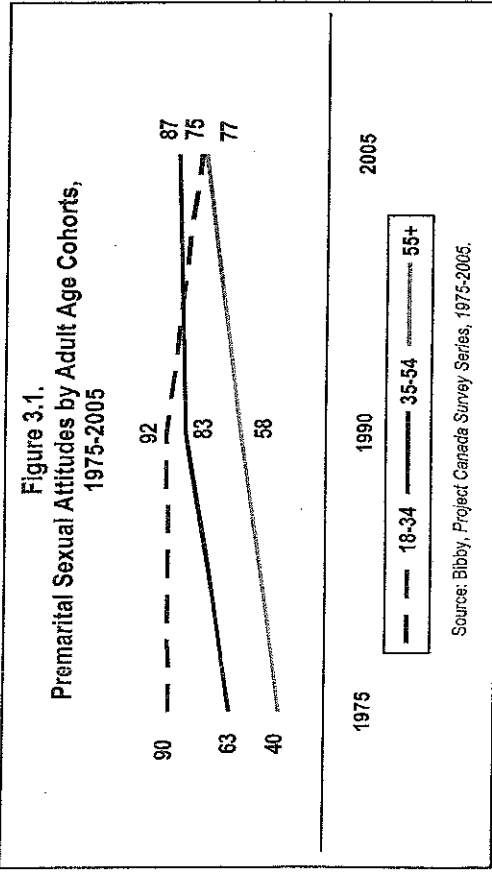
The Boomer Backdrop

One of the most highly-publicized cultural upheavals introduced by the Boomers was the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s. The Revolution involved a dramatic change in nonmarital sexual attitudes and behaviour in North America, as well as the freeing up of thinking about sexuality as a whole.

The legacy can be seen in the fact that sex outside of marriage has come to be widely endorsed and practiced. The media routinely portray couples "going to bed with each other," with marriage scarcely a consideration, unless one of the individual happens to be married.

Reflecting such a nonchalant mood toward nonmarital sex, the authors of one widely-used North American introductory sociology text write matter-of-factly, "Several generations ago, cultural norms in Canada endorsed sexual activity only after marriage and no doubt, some people married simply for this reason. But today, they go on to say, "things are different."¹

Such media depictions and academic reflections seem to be in touch with the views and behaviour of many if not most people. Surveys in Canada show that, in contrast to thinking in the pre-1960s, by 1975 some 65% of Canadians felt that premarital sex was “not wrong at all” or “wrong only sometimes,” with the figure standing at about 80% today. Those levels, incidentally, are higher than in the U.S., where the “not wrong/wrong only sometimes” figure was around 55% in 1975, and rose to about 65% in 1985 – the level at which it has remained now for more than two decades.²



As for behaviour, we don't have much trend data for Canada to go on. But in the United States, studies dating back to Alfred Kinsey in the 1940s and 50s found that some 85% of American men had engaged in premarital sex, as had about 50% of women. By the early 1980s, the level for women had increased to over 80%, whereas the figure for men remained largely unchanged.³ Writing at the time, sexuality expert John Gagnon went so far as to say, “The number of females who have had intercourse before marriage is the sexual revolution.”⁴ Today, gender differences in attitudes and behaviour appear to be negligible in both Canada and the U.S.

That isn't to say that everyone is excited about the sexual liberation “contribution” of Boomers. One is hard-pressed, for example, to find an established North American religious group that gives explicit approval to nonmarital sex. As University of Toronto sociologist Mariana Valverde has put it, “Even the most liberal Christian theologian would never defend casual sex.”⁵ Opposition remains particularly strong, especially at the leadership level, among groups including evangelicals, Muslims, and Catholics.

Apart from the thinking of religious groups, some observers have maintained that concern about AIDS and calls for safe sex since the mid-80s, along with the increasing presence of interest groups advocating chastity, have contributed to more conservative sexual attitudes and behaviour.⁶ My 2005 Project Canada national adult survey found some preliminary support for that argument: for the first time since the 1970s, the approval level for premarital sex was down among young adults – from above 90% to below 80%.

Still, the Boomers have contributed to the creation of a Canadian social milieu that is characterized by considerable sexual freedom. That freedom extends beyond behaviour to sexual orientation. One not only can do what one wants; one can also be what one wants. Acceptance of homosexuality and the acknowledgment of gay rights is widespread; gay marriage is legal. The outlook of many is the outlook expressed by an 18-year-old female from the Kitchener area: “Why should I be bothered about what people do sexually? People can do whatever they want.”

When that freedom is combined with the Internet, advertising, and pop culture, it's not surprising that a veteran sex educator like American Ruth Westheimer has been warning parents that an array of sexual possibilities is rampant and treated casually among young people today. “Sharing each other's genitals has become like sharing a cigarette, drink or joint in some circles,” writes “Dr. Ruth.”⁷ Allegedly, teenagers are “hooking up” often and in any number of ways.⁸

The Millennial Generation's Response

The Project Teen Canada surveys provide readings on teenage sexual attitudes and behaviour going back to 1984. What is significant about that first reading is that it provided data on the children of those Boomers who had lived through the Sexual Revolution of the 60s.

Sexual Attitudes

As just noted, in 1975, 90% of Boomers indicated that *sex before marriage* was either "not wrong at all" (59%) or only "sometimes wrong" (31%). Obviously they were thinking of unmarried people generally, not teenagers – and certainly not their teenagers – specifically.

In light of such outlooks on the part of their Boomer parents, it is not surprising to find that 80% of teenagers in 1984 agreed with the statement, "Sex before marriage is alright when people love each other." By 1992, the figure had risen to 87%. An item added that year, asking if teens felt premarital sex was "alright when people like each other," received the endorsement of 64%. In 2000, the approval of sex before marriage when love is involved slipped slightly to 82%; in the case of the "like each other" criterion, the level also fell, to 58%.

Table 3.1. Teenage Sexual Attitudes, 1984-2000

	% Approving		
	1984	1992	2000
Premarital Sex			
Sex before marriage when people LOVE each other	80%	87	82
Sex before marriage when people LIKE each other	**	64	58
Extramartial Sex			
A married person having sex with someone other than their marriage partner	12	8	9
Homosexuality			
Sexual relations between two people of the same sex	26	38	54

As things turned out, the Sexual Revolution did not result in any long-term changes in attitudes toward *extramarital sex* – despite the 1960s publicity given to themes like "open marriage."

and "swinging." Between 1975 and 2000, adult endorsement of people having sex with someone other than their marriage partner fell from 21% to 14%. Among teenagers, the level of approval declined from 12% in 1984 to 9% by 2000.

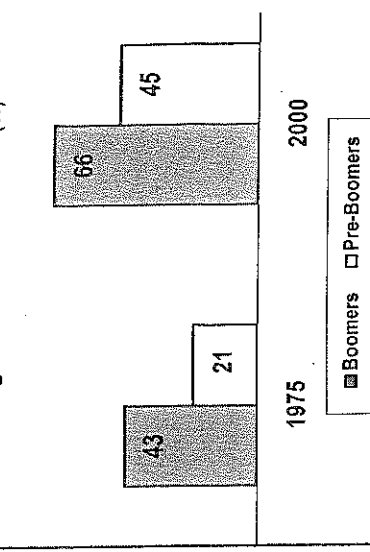
A major shift, however, occurred in attitudes toward *homosexuality*. In 1975, 43% of Boomers indicated that they approved of people of the same sex having sexual relations, in sharp contrast to just 21% of their parents and grandparents. By 2000, those two levels increased to 66% and 45% respectively.

Growing up with such increasingly positive views of homosexuality, some 1 in 4 teens endorsed gay and lesbian sexual relations in 1984, with the level increasing to more than 2 in 4 by 2000.

In the 2008 survey, we framed the questions a bit differently. We wanted to distinguish between teenagers personally approving of behaviour versus being willing to accept behaviour. This distinction seems to be an important one to identify in pluralistically-minded society such as Canada. Here we encouraged to live out life as we see fit, this side of the law. You also are called upon to extend the privilege to other people even if we do not personally endorse their lifestyles.

At minimum, Canadians are expected to at best respect differences and at least tolerate them. The importance of this distinction became particularly evident during the heated same-sex marriage debate. Approval was difficult to come by; in the end, the government called on people to be willing to at least exhibit acceptance. The posture is something of "the Canadian way."

Figure 3.2. Approval of Homosexuality by Age Cohort: 1975 & 2000 (%)



When we posed sexual attitudes in this manner to teenagers, what we found is that *premarital sex* when love is involved is something that receives a high level of both acceptance and approval (72%). If sex only has a "like" component, acceptance remains fairly high, but approval drops significantly.

In the case of *extramarital sex*, only 5% of teens say this is something that receives both their acceptance and approval. In fact, some 80% say they neither accept nor approve of married people having sex with other partners. One 16-year-old female from just outside Edmonton explains this way: "A person who has sex with someone other than their marriage partner ruins their life."

Table 3.2. Teenage Sexual Attitudes: 2008

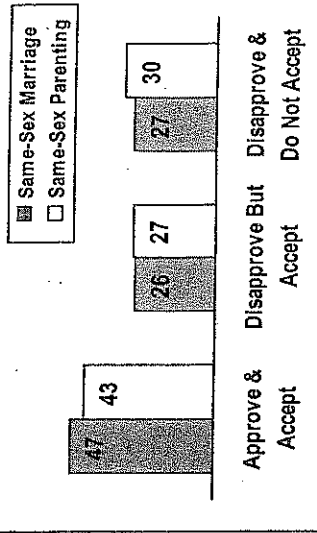
	Approve & Accept	Disapprove But Accept	Disapprove & Do Not Accept	Totals
Premarital Sex...				
when people LOVE each other	72%	19	9	100
when people LIKE each other	38	37	25	100
Extramarital Sex				
other than with one's marriage partner	5	17	78	100
Homosexuality				
Sexual relations between two people of the same sex	44	28	28	100

As for *homosexuality*, 44% say they both accept and approve of same-sex relations. A 15-year-old male from a mountain town in southern B.C. says succinctly, "I don't see a problem with it." However, another 28% of teens indicate that they are willing to accept homosexuality, even if they do not personally approve.

The same pattern is apparent with both *same-sex marriage* and *same-sex parenting*. Similar to what polls found for adults at the time same-sex marriage came into being in July of 2005, about 2 in 4 teens approve of gay unions. However, another 1 in 4 say they accept such marriages, even if they do not approve. The remaining 1 in 4 neither approve of gay marriages, nor accept them.

Teenagers give virtually the same proportion of responses when asked how they feel about same-sex couples raising children.

Figure 3.3. Same-Sex Marriage & Parenting (%)



Appropriate Physical and Sexual Behaviour

Going back to our first youth survey in 1984, we have wanted to get a sense of actual behaviour, beyond probing attitudes. What some of our critics have not always understood is that our ability to explore sexual behaviour is limited by the fact that we have to get the permission of schools and school boards in order to have the survey administered. If we did not exhibit an appropriate balance between curiosity and sensitivity, we would not be able to obtain permission to ask the questions that we do include.

One way that we attempted to explore sexual behaviour in that first survey was by asking teens what they see as appropriate behaviour on dates. The item read, "If two people on a date like each other, do you think it is alright for them to...." We then posed the four possibilities of "Hold hands," "Kiss," "Neck," "Pet," and "Have Sexual Relations." The three response options were (1) "Yes, first date," (2) "Yes, after a few dates," and (3) "No."

Over the years, we found ourselves wanting both to update the language and expand the social situations by excluding the word "date." We increasingly also took more than a little flack from students over using terms such as "neck" and "pet."

So, after going with the same item in 1984, 1992, and 2000, we altered it slightly in 2008, merging "Neck" and "Pet" into "Make out" and altering the response options to read, (1) "Yes, the first time together," (2) "Yes, after a few times together," and (3) "No."

This methodological footnote also provides you with some data on both changing social patterns and language.

- The findings show that, in 1984, teens, both male and female, were somewhat more inclined than they are today to think that *holding hands* and *kissing* were appropriate the first time a couple was together. Almost everyone in both 1984 and 2008 felt both were certainly fine after a few dates or times together.
- "Making out" and its 1984 equivalent of "petting" was seen in both years as appropriate right away by about 3 in 10 teens, led by males. However, there has been a noteworthy increase in the percentage of females who feel the first time together is okay (16% to 24%). A majority of both males and females have continued to think couples should be with each other at least a few times before they "make out," with only a small portion of about 5% thinking it is not eventually appropriate.
- And what about *having sex*? Here, the national and gender levels have changed little from 1984. Just over 1 in 10 teenagers – led by males – feel sex is okay the first time a couple is together. But about 5 in 10 think couples should be together a few times. As with "making out," there has been an increase (from 35% to 48%) in the inclination of females to think sex is fine after a few times together. Some 36% of teens maintain that sex is not appropriate at all, down from 45% in 1984.

Table 3.3. Appropriate Behaviour on Dates/Time Together: 1984-2008

	Hold Hands 1st Few No	Kiss 1st Few No	Make Out* 1st Few No	Have Sex	
				1st	Few No
Nationally					
2008	80% 19 1	57 41 2	30 65 5	12	52 36
1984	92 8 0	82 18 0	28 57 15	11	44 45
Males					
2008	82 17 1	61 37 2	37 59 4	20	56 24
1984	92 7 1	84 16 0	42 50 8	19	52 29
Females					
2008	78 21 1	52 46 2	24 70 6	6	48 46
1984	92 8 0	80 19 1	16 63 21	3	35 62

* The term "pet" was used in 1984.

In short, today's teenagers are somewhat less likely than their counterparts in the mid-1980s to give the green light to kissing an even holding hands the first time together. But, females in particular are now more inclined both to make out and have sex earlier in relationships than was the case two to three decades ago.

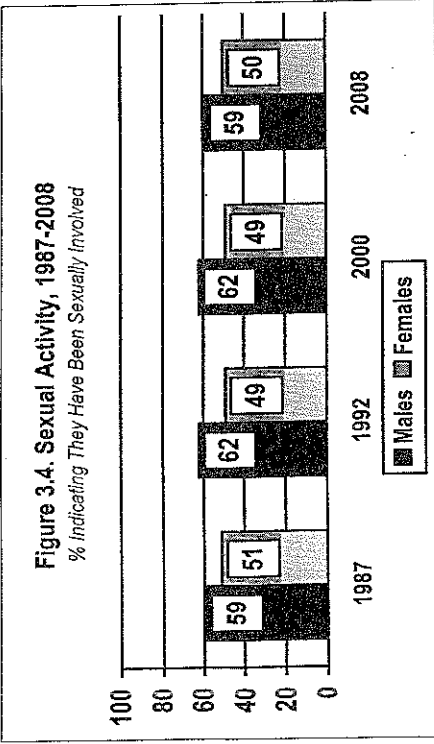
What Teens Have to Say About When Sex is Appropriate

"...If only like someone, then no sex...Depends if I am dating someone...It should not be for a long time...If they love each other...People should be together for a certain amount of time...After marriage...It depends on how much you are into the person...Eventually, but not right away...It's their own choice...Like, a month...Only if they are married...After awhile...It depends how long they have known each other and their age...After a long relationship and they know they are ready...Love is a broad, misused term in 99% of situations...Eventually, not the second or third time meeting...After years together...If they love each other deeply and intend to marry..."

Actual Sexual Behaviour

Beginning with a special Project Teen Canada survey that my colleague Don Posterski and I carried out with the help of the Gallup organization for the Canadian Youth Foundation in 1987, we began to ask teens more directly about their sexual activities. Recognizing the importance of more clearly understanding such an important part of young lives, school authorities have agreed to better information in the area is needed. We now have two decades of good data on teenage sexual behaviour.

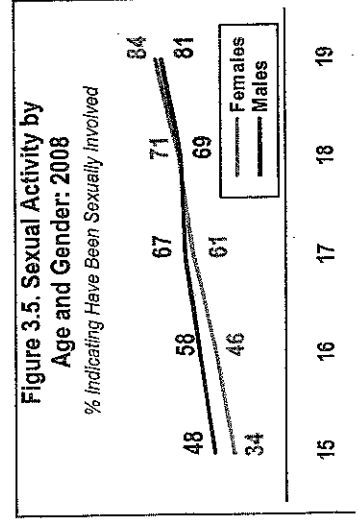
- In 1987, we found that 55% of 15-to-19-year-olds had been sexually involved, including some 60% of males and 50% females.
- Those levels have remained virtually unchanged through today



Some observers have expressed concern about young people experiencing more things sexually at earlier ages. For example, American education professor Diane Levin's recently released book, *So Sexy, So Soon*, has a publicity blurb that talks about the negative impact on children of thong panties, padded bras, T-shirts, sexy TV content, movies, video games, cartoons, young pop stars, sexually provocative clothing, dancing, and lyrics.⁹ Then there's been the publicity given to "sexting" – the text messaging (texting) of sexually explicit images that is said to be very common among teenagers.¹⁰

Statistics Canada reports that the proportion of teens who are sexually active before they turned 15 is currently around 8% - down from 12% in the mid 1990s.¹¹ Our current survey reveals that sexual activity escalates fairly quickly after that.

- By the time they are 15, 1 in 2 males and 1 in 3 females say they have been sexually involved.
- Those figures climb during the teen years, to close to 85% at 19.
- Gender levels that initially favour males reverse themselves in favour of females by the time teens hit 18.



Apart from the question of whether or not they *have ever* been sexually involved, about 5 in 10 males and 4 in 10 females indicate that they currently are engaging in sex.

- Some 5% of teens, led by males, say they have sex every day.
- Weekly activity is reported by about 15%, monthly by another 10% to 15%.
- A further 10-15% say that they only rarely engage in sex.

Table 3.4. Teenage Sexual Activity by Gender
"About how often do you engage in sex?"

	Nationally	Males	Females
Daily	5%	7	3
Several times a week	9	8	10
About once a week	7	6	7
2-3 times a month	7	7	7
About once a month	4	6	3
Hardly ever	12	14	9
Never	56	52	61
Totals	100	100	100

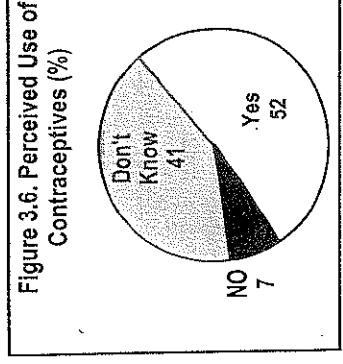
These figures are consistent with recent Statistics Canada survey results for 2003-05 that pegged male and female sexual activity a 43%.¹²

Contraception and AIDS

We asked our respondents, "Do most of the teenagers you know who are sexually active use contraceptives?"

About 5 in 10 think they do and 1 in 10 think they don't. The remainder say they don't really know. That means that, among those who feel they know, 88% maintain that, generally speaking, teens are using some form of birth control, while 12% say they are not.

Such impressions may be reasonably accurate in light of Statistics Canada findings indicating that about 80% of sexually active 15-to-19-year-olds say they are using condoms specifically, as do some 70% of females. Condom use was even higher among younger teens who also were more likely to be in short-term relationships.¹³



In exploring the idea that the AIDS scare has been a deterrent to premarital sex or at least contributed to a greater use of contraceptives, we asked teens bluntly, "Has the existence of HIV/AIDS influenced your personal sexual habits?"

- As indicated earlier, about 45% of teenagers indicated that they have never been sexually involved.
- Around 15% said that they are not currently sexually involved.
- Of the remaining 40%-or-so of teens who see themselves as sexually active, 47% indicate that AIDS has had an influence on their sex lives, with no significant difference between males and females.
- That figure is down fairly significantly from 1992, as well as 2000, times when AIDS was receiving a considerable amount of media attention.

Figure 3.7. AIDS: A Very Serious Problem (%)

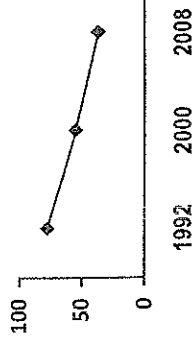


Table 3.5. The Limited Impact of AIDS
"Has the existence of AIDS influenced your own personal sexual habits?"

	% Yes		
	All	Males	Females
2008	47	47	46
2000	59	56	62
1992	67	63	71

It's worth noting that, in 1992, 77% of teenagers told us that they felt AIDS was a "very serious" problem in Canada. By 2000, the figure had dropped to 55%. Today, only 38% of young people say that they think AIDS is a "very serious" problem, at least in our country and therefore a problem that affects them directly.

In May of 2008, Roger England, who is with a Grenada-based think tank, wrote in the *British Medical Journal* that UNAIDS, the United Nations agency leading the fight against AIDS, has outlived its purpose and should be disbanded. He argued that closing the agency would free up its annual \$200 million budget for other health problems such as pneumonia, which kills more children every year than AIDS, malaria, and measles combined.¹⁴

Such an observation illustrates the current downplaying of the AIDS epidemic that clearly is having an impact on teenage perception of the severity of the problem globally and nationally.

Some Correlates of Sexual Attitudes and Behaviour

Some stereotypes about the regional variations in sexual attitudes and behaviour are confirmed by the latest survey.

- Approval of premarital sex and sexual involvement are higher in Quebec and the North than the rest of the country.
- Resistance to homosexuality, including same-sex marriage, is greatest in Saskatchewan.
- The belief that acquaintances are using contraceptives is somewhat lower in the North than elsewhere.

However, there are few variations by community size.

- Contrary to widespread thinking, teens in smaller communities are, if anything, somewhat more likely than teens in larger cities to approve of and engage in sex.
- In addition, they defy the "redneck" label, being no less likely – nor any more likely – than teens in the bigger cities to express approval of gay sex and gay marriage.

Table 3.6. Approval and Acceptance of Select Behaviours and Sexual Involvement by Region and Gender: 2008

	Accept and Approve			"Yes"	
	Premarital Sex if Love	Homosexual Relations	Same-Sex Marriage	Sex OK Within Times	Have Been Sexually Involved
Nationally	72%	44	47	64	54
B.C.	75	43	46	66	55
Alberta	70	45	47	58	52
Saskatchewan	62	41	44	48	53
Manitoba	63	42	48	51	52
Ontario	65	42	43	55	50
Quebec	67	49	51	62	62
Atlantic	78	53	57	64	60
North	72	46	51	76	71
>400,000	70	43	46	65	49
100,000-400,000	72	47	48	63	55
10,000-99,000	75	44	45	68	59
<10,000	74	43	46	64	60

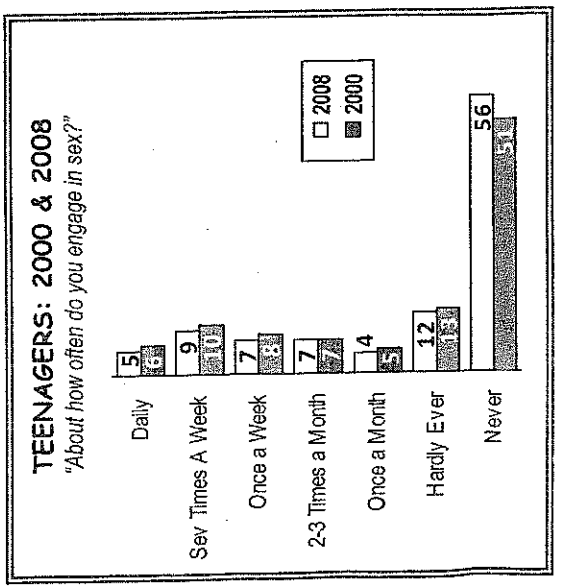
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Comparisons with Adults & Teens from Earlier Decades

Teenagers are frequently stereotyped as being sexually indulgent. It is a false portrait.

The Project Canada surveys show that the overall sexual activity levels of teens fall well behind the levels of adults of all ages. In fact, teens' weekly levels of sexual activity are on a par with adults over 60 and

actually fall below seniors' monthly-plus levels (32% versus 40%). Over the past decade, there's been little change in the frequency of teenage sexual activity – with one exception: the percentage who say they *never* have sex has increased from 51% to 56%. Prior to 2000, by the way, we didn't dare ask the direct question. Hmm...now there's some telling data on greater openness, versus a change in sexual behaviour.



GENERATIONS		"About how often do you engage in sex?"		
Teens	Post-Boomers	Baby Boomers	Pre-Boomers	
	b. > 1965	b. 1946-65	b. < 1946	
Daily	5%	3	2	1
Sev times a week	9	28	22	5
About once a week	7	20	31	14
2-3 times a month	7	14	16	12
About once a month	4	4	6	8
Hardly ever	12	14	16	22
Never	56	17	7	38

Sources: Project Canada 2005 & PTC 2008.

What It All Means

Who Said Sex is Just for Fun?

The findings underscore a basic point that is often lost in adults being alarmed that sex is taking place among teenagers: young people continue to emphasize that sex, for the most part, should be tied to meaningful relationships. Because we adults typically minimize the significance of teenage romance, we also are inclined to overlook the fact that most young females and males tie their sexual activity to those romances – however fleeting and seemingly superficial we may see them to be. As with adults, teenage sex comes with joy and pain that ebbs and flows with the coming and going of relationships.

Rolheiser's Take

Since the dawn of civilization virtually every culture has had strong taboos about sex. Sex has been, almost without exception, linked to marriage.

Our own culture, thanks largely to the very parents who are currently worrying about their teens, has severed that link. Today's Canadian teen has, for the most part, been raised to believe that sex is an extension of dating, that sex can legitimately take place before marriage, if love is there, and that it can be re-sacralized and made monogamous after marriage. We live in a culture that believes we can experiment with sex until we find the right person to marry and then, so to speak, bring our sex home and live it out more traditionally.

That is the not-so-unconscious ethos that teens in Canada breathe in today, as is evident from their high approval ratings for premarital sex (if people love each other – 72%) and their strong disapproval for extramarital sex (5%).

As a theologian, I am encouraged. Bibby's numbers suggest that, deep down, contemporary teens still intuitively know that sex is a sacred fire, not to be played with casually. For example, today's teens are more likely to disapprove of premarital sex than yesterday's teens. Relatively few defend casual, recreational sex; most demand that love be present. These are some healthy signs.