

## Joseph: Our children need to hear from us

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If you look back at the history and traditions of just about any tribe in America you will find coming of age ceremonies that mark an important passage for young boys and girls. It is an important time for their parents and other adults who shape their child's future. Expectations for behavior, and the new roles and responsibilities the children will assume as they enter adulthood, including education about sex, were shared through stories, instruction, prayers and songs. That is not always the case today.

A first drink, a first cigarette, the first chance to have sex; each of these "coming of age" moments require teens and pre-teens to rely on their values in deciding what they will do. Teens are engaging in sex at younger ages. Almost half of our first-time Native mothers are giving birth under the age of 20. But, like most children in America, the majority of our Native youth learn more about sex from friends, television and celebrities than from the people who love them the most.

The one bright spot is that despite all these outside influences children still say the most important factor in developing values is their families. So, despite the fact that the topic of sex can be uncomfortable, our children want to know what we expect of them and how we can help them get through adolescence by making the right choices.

When my children were young, their mother and I talked constantly to each of our four sons and one daughter. But, I am a little closer to my sons because we were able to talk in our sweathouse about life and the way to live today. I think the traditional way of counseling our young people might be the most effective way.

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Many couples start families with a teen pregnancy, but all too often the family breaks apart and the children are affected for the rest of their lives. As a tribal leader, seeing those little broken hearts that Family Services and Indian Child Welfare have to deal with is so hard. Budgets are limited and the case load is so high that it takes longer and longer to help those hearts to heal. Sometimes they never do, which is part of the reason why there are high suicide rates in Indian county.

Also, in order to raise children, you need to have a good, steady income. It is really tough in this economic recession to work and to further your education. Working at both, at the same time as raising children, is even tougher.

So I would tell parents: Make sure your children's feet are planted on the ground, then maybe they can look towards having a good family when it's time.

I would say to parents, do you want to be a grandparent who is raising your grandchildren, or would you like your children to raise their own family?

And I would say, do you want your children to become parents at a young age, or would you rather talk to them about waiting to be parents?

A national campaign to help parents is now underway; called the Parents Speak Up National Campaign, it provides culturally specific materials to help parents speak to their children about delaying sexual activity. There also is help for parents at [www.4Parents.gov/shareyourvision](http://www.4Parents.gov/shareyourvision). This sounds to me like a project that could make our families more stable, and even if it impacts only one or two, maybe it will make for fewer broken homes.

These conversations can feel awkward, I know, but parents are not alone. Here is some advice from the campaign.

Believe that you matter. Mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, auntie, uncle, and all the others who love our children are the childrens' most powerful influence – more powerful than the media, schools, churches or even friends. And our children want to hear from us, even if they squirm or roll their eyes when we bring up the subject of sex.

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Listen, don't lecture, and start young. In today's world even kindergarteners are hearing about sex. Shouldn't our children hear about it from us?

Start small and keep it low-key. A movie star's teenage sister has a baby. There's a story about STDs on the news. Many people feel more comfortable talking about the subject in the car, washing dishes, or watching TV. There's no need for "the big talk." Just let them know it's OK to talk about sex and share your vision for their future.

Don't worry about the "hypocrite factor." Many who had babies early mistakenly believe they have given up the right to ask their children to wait. But that's not true. We, above all, know how hard it is to raise a child when you're still almost a child yourself. That puts us in an especially strong position to talk with the next generation.

You don't need to know everything.

Organizations serving families of Native youth are invited to partner with the Native American Outreach Center in the Parents Speak Up National Campaign. They will receive presentation materials and a curriculum guide developed specifically for Native parents as well as custom, limited edition Pendleton blankets that can be used as incentives in outreach. More information is available from Kauffman & Associates, Inc. at (509) 747-4994.

We used to do this. It was an important part of our culture. I am hopeful that our tribal leaders will encourage our elders, our spiritual leaders, and our families to restore and practice the important puberty rites that were once a vital part of our traditions. I am also hopeful that more families, particularly parents, will take the time to speak to their children about the precious gift of life. We need to speak up again.

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