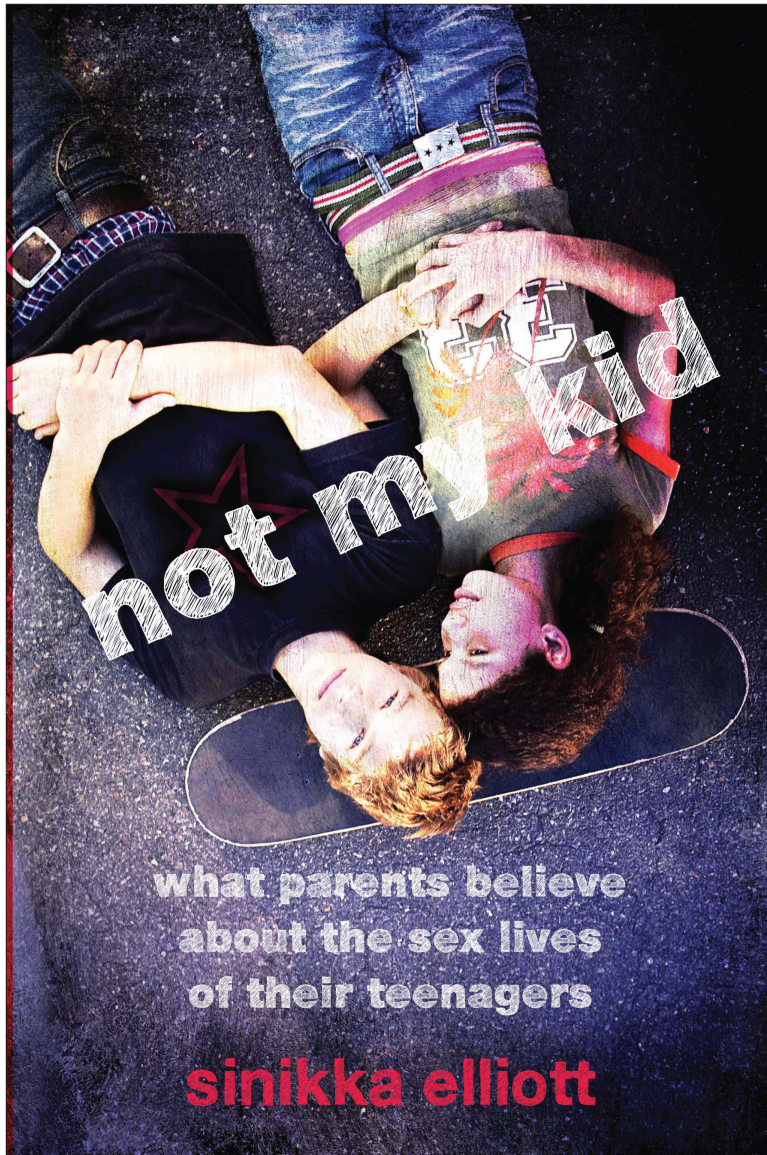


NOT MY KID

What Parents Believe about
the Sex Lives of Their Teenagers

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



“Beautifully written, engaging, and insightful.... Elliott invites readers to think critically about the revealing stories of parenting and family life that give life to this relevant book.”

—GLORIA GONZALEZ-LOPEZ,
AUTHOR OF *EROTIC JOURNEYS*

Teenagers have sex. While almost all parents understand that many teenagers are sexually active, there is a paradox in many parents' thinking: they insist their own teen children are not sexual, but characterize their children's peers as sexually-driven and hypersexual. Rather than accuse parents of being in denial, Sinikka Elliott teases out the complex dynamics behind this thinking, demonstrating that it is rooted in fears and anxieties about being a good parent, the risks of teen sexual activity, and teenagers' future economic and social status.

Going beyond the hype and controversy, Elliott examines how a diverse group of American parents of teenagers understand teen sexuality, showing that, in contrast to the idea that parents are polarized in their beliefs, parents are confused, anxious, and ambivalent about teen sexual activity and how best to guide their own children's sexuality. Framed with an eye to the debates about teenage abstinence and sex education in school, Elliott also links parents' understandings to the contradictory messages and broad moral panic around child and teen sexuality. Ultimately, Elliott considers the social and cultural conditions that might make it easier for parents to talk with their teens about sex, calling for new ways of thinking and talking about teen sexuality that promote social justice and empower parents to embrace their children as fully sexual subjects.

224 PAGES • 4 TABLES
PAPER • 978-0-8147-2259-6

Pages 1-7

SUMMARY

Opening with a mother's description of her fears for her 14-year-old son's sexual safety, the introduction develops the book's main finding: the parents interviewed said their own children are not sexual but viewed other teenagers—their children's peers—as highly sexually motivated. Parents' anxieties about their children's sexuality offer a window to explore modern ways of thinking about adolescence, sexuality, and parental accountability, as well as the role of social inequality in an increasingly unequal society.

DISCUSSION POINTS

The introduction serves as a foundation for the book, introducing the reader to the study methodology and the book's main themes, which include:

- parents' conflict about youth sexuality and how their stories serve as an important counterpoint to the ideologically-driven debates over teen sexuality
- the complex dynamics that shape how parents talk to their children about sexuality
- the ways parents' conversations with their teens about sex reflect and reproduce social inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality

Sex Panics, pages 9-19

SUMMARY

Looking at local and national debates over sex education, this chapter provides the historical background necessary to make sense of America's complex relationship to sexuality. Introducing readers to a sociological way of thinking about sexuality, the chapter demonstrates how American sexual practices and the regulation of sexuality have changed over time and are closely linked to broader social processes, such as America's urbanization and industrialization, and to social inequalities based on gender, race, and social class.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What was the Adolescent Family Life Act and what is its significance?
- How does the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (also known as welfare reform) define abstinence-only sex education?
- Define "discourses." What are the dominant discourses of sexuality in the U.S. and where do they come from?
- What does legislators' historical opposition to changing the age of sexual consent tell us about pre-nineteenth century understandings of childhood and child sexuality? How and why have ideas about childhood and child sexuality shifted in the modern era?
- In what ways are sexuality and social inequality intertwined in the United States?

The Asexual Teen, pages 20-46

SUMMARY

Tracing parents' views of their children in relation to sexuality, this chapter charts how and why parents describe their children as young, immature, and sexually naïve. Pointing to larger controversies around child sexuality, such as whether to make a vaccine for the sexually transmitted infection HPV mandatory for 11-year-old girls, the chapter argues that parents are not alone in wanting to maintain a notion of children as asexual. Parents are clearly frightened of the risks that sex poses to their children and want them to be safe from the dangerous consequences of sex. Their uncertainty about how to achieve this reflects larger conflicts about how best to protect young people from sexual risk. Drawing on the experiences of two parents whom Child Protective Services investigated because people thought their children were too sexually knowledgeable, the chapter also shows that parents can face consequences if their children seem to know too much about sex.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do the parents' discussions in this chapter reveal about their ideas on youth sexuality? Why do parents say their children are sexually innocent?
- Most of the parents in the book talked with their children about contraception but felt conflicted about these conversations. Why?
- What is "the danger discourse of teen sexuality"? Is sex more dangerous than it used to be?
- What does the controversy over school districts mandating an HPV vaccine say about the political climate around youth sexuality in the U.S.?
- Analyze the glossary of sexual and reproductive terms at the end of the chapter: what is included and what is missing from the glossary?

Negotiating the Erotic, pages 47-62

SUMMARY

When parents try to initiate conversations about sex their children sometimes resist, saying they don't want to talk about sex with their parents. Exploring the dynamics of family sex talk, the chapter points to the prominent role gender and emotions play in these conversations. Mothers described boys as especially resistant to their efforts to talk with them about sex. Even though sex is all around us in U.S. culture, people who talk openly about sex are said to have no shame: the emotion of shame and the idea that sex is private can create discomfort for parents, even those who wish to speak openly about sex with their children.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do family conversations about sex challenge the notion that parental power is absolute?
- This chapter argues that gender inequality in society makes it difficult for parents and teenagers to discuss sexuality. Discuss three ways that gender stereotypes inhibit open communication about sex. Provide a specific example of each.
- What is "shame" and how is it connected to sexuality? What does shame have to do with family sex talk?

The Hypersexual Teen, pages 63-82

SUMMARY

Teenagers, with their raging hormones and attractive young bodies, are incapable of handling the responsibilities of sex, said parents, a belief shared by many Americans. Exploring how parents talk about sex, age, and responsibility, this chapter points to a binary they construct between responsible adult sexuality and irresponsible teen sexuality. This binary is linked to historically- and culturally-specific ideas about adolescence, a developmental stage in the life course discovered in 1904. Scratching below the surface of the adolescent-adult sexual binary, however, reveals that parents are quite worried about the harm adult sexual predators pose to their children. From advertising portraying youthful bodies as the cultural epitome of sexiness to popular television programs about pedophiles, media images present young people as not simply innocent and vulnerable, but as profoundly desirable because of their youthful innocence. These dual associations magnify adults' fears about child and teen sexual safety.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Define "binary thinking" and "controlling images" and provide examples of how each affect adults' willingness to trust young people with sexual knowledge and citizenship.
- Why do parents think teenagers are incapable of making responsible decisions around sexuality? Are parents the only ones who think this way?
- This chapter argues that, when it comes to sexuality, age is an important axis of social inequality. Explain what this means.
- How does the discourse that sexual predators can be anyone and everywhere make it difficult to gauge sexual danger?
- Why might even American adults find it difficult to achieve happy, safe, fulfilling sexual relationships?

Other Teens, pages 83-98

SUMMARY

Parents do not simply view adults as potential threats to their teenagers' sexual well-being; they also worry about their children's peers whom they described as "openly sexual," "promiscuous," and a threat to their children's sexual innocence and safety. But not all teenagers pose an equal danger: parents routinely used race, class, and gender in constructing "other" teens as hypersexual in contrast to their asexual children. Linking parents' binary thinking to longstanding sexual stereotypes of the poor, new immigrants, people of color, and gays and lesbians, this chapter points to the role sexuality plays in notions of good citizenship in a highly unequal society like the U.S.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How and why did the parents talk about race and class in veiled and coded language?
- Which groups historically bore the mantle of "bad" sexuality and with what consequences?
- What is "heteronormativity" and how are parents' assumptions about their children heteronormative?
- What is the good girl/bad girl dichotomy? Does it still have relevance for teenage girls' sexual experiences?
- Why do sexual binaries and hierarchies exist at all? Whose interests do they serve?

Anxious Monitoring, pages 99-117

SUMMARY

The danger discourse of teen sexuality informs parents' sense that their teenagers, facing peer pressure and risk, need to be kept busy and carefully monitored. Despite parents' common belief in the need to protect their children, parental monitoring is shaped and constrained by the resources at parents' disposal. Middle-class parents can access a range of enrichment programs to keep their children busy as well as technology to monitor their whereabouts. Lower-income parents literally use their bodies to safeguard their teenagers. This chapter delineates these strategies and discusses their consequences for parents' and teenagers' well-being.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why do parents want their teenage children to be involved in extracurricular activities?
- Why are parents so worried about their children's friendships? How do they try to monitor them?
- How do parents use technology in their efforts to keep their children safe? Why are some parents conflicted about the Internet?
- How does Charlene's story show the different consequences of parents' vigilance in protecting their children?

Uncertainty in Parents' Sexual Lessons, pages 118-143

SUMMARY

Many parents promote sexual abstinence when they talk about sex with their children, even as they doubt its practicality. This chapter explores parents' ambivalent relationship to abstinence and other advice they give their children about sex. Using the term ambivalence more in a sociological than psychological sense, the chapter shows how ambivalence stems from pressures imposed by the contradictory demands placed on parents. Highlighting the stories of two parents—a liberal mother of two teenage daughters and a conservative father of one teenage son—reveals the role gendered sexual double standards and heteronormativity play in parents' concerns about how best to guide teen sexuality. Parents' stories demonstrate that American parents are not so neatly divided into sexual liberals and conservatives, as the debates over sex education would suggest.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is “ambivalence”? How do sociologists study ambivalence?
- Why do parents talk to their children about abstinence even as many think it is an unrealistic expectation for their teens?
- Research into the debates over sex education finds that Americans are divided into sexual liberals and conservatives. Describe the beliefs of these two groups. Can parents of teenagers be clearly divided into these two groups? Why or why not?
- In what ways do Corina and Sharon's concerns about their teenage daughters' sexual safety and well-being illustrate gendered sexual double standards?
- How do Scott's concerns about his son's sexuality demonstrate the links between heterosexuality and masculinity?

Conclusion, pages 144-155

SUMMARY

The conclusion reviews the practical and theoretical implications of the book. It discusses the things we can do as a society to better support families and diverse sexualities. Sexuality is not fixed but is a fluid, changing, and contested site of social control and resistance. Transforming the ways Americans deal with teen sexuality would involve challenging the danger discourse of teen sexual activity and dominant ideas about teenagers as incapable of managing the risks of sex. It would also involve a strong social justice ethos that confronts racist, sexist, and heteronormative sexual stereotypes.

APPENDIX, PAGES 157-163

The appendix provides a more detailed account of the study methods and the demographics of the parents interviewed.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What did you learn about sex at home? At school? Who taught you?
- How and why have children's and teens' sexualities come to be a topic of urgent public and private concern?
- How is religion connected to parents' messages to teens regarding sex and sexuality?
- What are the theoretical implications of "Not my kid"? Is sexuality an important component of social life? Why or why not?
- What did you think was the most compelling argument about why parents have such difficulty talking with their children about sexuality?
- What is the relationship between institutions (schools, government, work, family) and family sex talk?

SUPPLEMENTAL ASSIGNMENTS

- In chapter three of *Not My Kid*, Sinikka Elliott argues that gender inequality in society makes it difficult for parents and teenagers to discuss sexuality. Discuss three ways that gender stereotypes inhibit open communication about sex. Provide a specific example of each.
- Discuss the two mainstream approaches to sex education: abstinence-only-until-marriage and comprehensive sex education. What assumptions do they make about gender and sexuality? Next, explain Elliott's pro-sex perspective on sex education, and compare and contrast its assumptions with those of the two mainstream approaches.
- According to Elliott, many parents believe their teenagers are not interested in sex. Write an essay explaining her argument. Why do they think their children are sexually innocent? Why do they think that "other" teens are hypersexual? In your answer, be sure to explain how parents use race, class, and gender in constructing "other" teens. What are the implications of this argument for social inequality?