LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX

Once upon a time, getting the scoop on the birds and the bees was the domain of slumber parties and recess gossip—shrouded in mystery and full of misinformation. With the advent of the Internet, do today’s young girls know it all?

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DO YOU REMEMBER your playground sexpert? You know who I’m talking about—the kid who would spend recess whispering of bizarre, unbelievable practices, of “cunny linguists” and “four skins,” things that sounded as foreign and ridiculous to your 11-year-old ears as wombats. I remember her well, because that kid was me.

With access to my older sister’s issues of Cosmopolitan and tattered V.C. Andrews books, not to mention cable television, I was the resident sexpert of my fifth-grade class. In between games of jump rope, my female friends and I would huddle near the bike racks, and I would regale them with the latest findings I had gleaned from Cinemax. With my bifocals, buckteeth, and plaid school uniform, I was practically a Norman Rockwell portrait of nercliness and the last person you’d suspect of puncturing the innocence of childhood with a diagram of a man’s testicles. And yet, there I was, the lazy-eyed Anais Nin of my Midwestern Catholic grade school. I would sneak my sister’s Cosmo into bed, puzzling over the numerous “mind-blowing” sex tips—like “throwing a picnic in bed with your lover” and spreading jam where jam was never intended to go. Then I’d waltz into school the next day, ready to blow some prepubescent minds with this revelation on condiment foreplay.

I was finally busted for my non-sanctioned sexed when one rainy day, I came in boasting of the existence of something so preposterous, one outraged girl absolutely refused to believe me. I had just unloaded the news that, apparently, there was an implement modeled after the male sex organ that some women used to please themselves. This was the last straw for my fellow classmate, a girl I’ll call Bernice. I don’t know if Bernice had just grown tired of my tenure as sex guru or was horrified by the increasingly absurd picture of human sexuality I painted, but she promptly went home and asked her mother if there was, in fact, any such thing as a “dodo.” All hell quickly broke loose, as her mother called the school, and the next day our teacher delivered a furious lecture about how we were not to be discussing things of a sexual nature at school, her eyes lingering on my crimson face as she spoke. Worst of all, the boys in the class christened poor Bernice with a nickname that followed her all the way through high school. (Oh Dodo Bird, wherever you are, please know that I am very sorry.)

Humbled by the experience, my one-woman Kinsey Institute abruptly closed shop, and I learned to share my sexual findings with only a few select friends who could be counted on for their discretion.

Looking back on this over two decades later, my dog-eared copy of Flowers in the Attic and pilfered issues of Cosmo seem rather tame. In an adolescent world that now contains the Internet, sexting, and Gossip Girl, my little dodo sex-toy kerfuffle seems as quaint as a sepia-tinted episode of The Little Rascals. I can only imagine what
I CAN ONLY IMAGINE WHAT 11-YEAR-OLD ME WOULD MAKE OF THINGS WERE SHE TRANSPORTED TO THE PRESENT AND INTRODUCED TO A GOOGLE SEARCH BAR. MY BIFOCALS WOULD PROBABLY MELT INTO MY SKULL.

sun on these sites, be it a question on birth control, masturbation, or the exact definition of “transgender,” and should she find herself without Wi-Fi, a girl can always send a message to the Birds and Bees text line in Durham, NC. Within 24 hours, a worker at the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Campaign will reply. (If this had been around back in the day, Bernice could have whipped out her iPhone and fact-checked my ass on the spot.) When I was a kid, the only references we could turn to were on the library bookshelf, where the raciest thing in the YA section was Forever. All this new media sure makes a penis named Ralph seem rather tame. I can’t help but wonder how much this easier access to information has changed the adolescent experience. Has it turned girls into jaded, pint-sized Carrie Bradshaws who would roll their eyes at Judy Blume and her medieval description of sanitary belts?

To find out, I spoke to Amy, 14, and her little sister Hannah, 11. They tell me older friends spilled the beans about sex one day out at recess. They later had “the talk” that was given to all sixth-grade classes, and anything the talk didn’t cover, well, Rachel and Ross did. “I learned a lot about sex from Friends,” Hannah chirps at me. “Like, about condoms. There’s a 97 percent chance of one working! And a 3 percent chance that it won’t!” Both girls seem to regard their mom, Friends, and actual friends as the go-to people for information, and don’t put much stock in the Internet. Sometimes with the Internet, if you’re looking for the wrong thing, you might get wrong information and get the wrong idea in your head,” Amy sagely explains.

Thirteen-year-old Melissa agrees. “I don’t like learning things about sex, puberty, or periods on the computer. Just because I want to hear it from a person, not read it from a screen.” Melissa also got the lowdown on sex from her paws. “I can’t remember exactly how I heard about it, but it was from a group of friends. Mainly guys. I didn’t know exactly what sex was, probably till about this year. And I probably still don’t fully understand it. But I have the general idea.” Melissa does cop to turning to the Internet for help at least once. “I asked my mom what oral sex was, and she wouldn’t tell me. So I looked it up. Once I did, I still didn’t understand it.” She also recalls a few raucous sleepovers, where she and her friends used Google to look up “sex and things,” and she says sex is a frequent topic of conversation. “It’s one of the main things girls my age talk about. I couldn’t think of a time I hung out with my friends and that subject didn’t come up.”

Next I spoke with Jessica, a girl I babysat in her younger years. She used to have me read her bedtime stories from a book called It’s So Amazing!, which is a colorful sex-education book for children. It’s written like a graphic novel and narrated by a cheerful ovum that floats through the fallopian tubes with a knowing smile upon her face. I certainly never had such a book when I was a child, and as Jessica and I thumb through it, I think I was more rapt than she was. I recall a night when she politely turned and demanded an explanation of “circumcision.” I was astounded (and relieved, I admit) that she knew the difference. “I’m glad she’s reading the book. It’s so weird!”

So when will they stop asking for the "handbook"? Jessica mostly says she "can" decide about sex. "But not right now," she adds, "my parents wouldn’t be too pleased." The girls say they’re "doing" and "slowly" and "in love" and "not ready." But they’re "talking about it." The fact that the 11-year-olds are "not ready" and the 13-year-olds are "doing" something = roughly the norm.
relieved) to discover that It's So Amazing! had an easy-to-understand answer, with a diagram.

So when I chat with Jessica, now 13, I'm not surprised that she sounds so knowledgeable. She's hanging out with her 15-year-old friend Ashley when we talk, and they seem highly amused by my line of questioning. "The Internet?" Jessica says. "I don't really look on the Internet. It's mostly guys who do that. If I had a question about sex, I would ask either my friends or my parents." I ask her if there are any girls at school who claim to know a lot about sex. But again, she points the finger at boys. "Guys like to pretend that they know more than they do. They talk like they're ready to do it, but they're really not." Can I practically hear her rolling her eyes over the phone.

Then we get into a discussion of "the bases." First base is still kissing, second is touching above the waist, and third is touching below the belt. A home run, of course, is still "doing it." But oral sex is now lumped in with third base and isn't as big a deal as sex. This is vastly different from my day, when oral sex was viewed as something far more intimate than sex. It was beyond the home run—more like

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what happened should the game move into extra innings. If fellows is now on par with fondling, dare I even ask those savvy young women if they've heard of Judy Blume? Will I be met with the sound of crickets?

"I thought Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret was the most amazing book ever!" Ashley swoons. "She was, like, my idol. It was just so cool, because she was going through all of this stuff. And I was going through the same stuff. I read it when I was 10 but didn't really understand it. So I read it again when I was 12." Melissa also hearts Judy.

"I love her books, because they talk about teen sex life and just make sense to me."

After talking to all of these bright, lovely ladies, I have one more, very important question to ask. But this time I do it via text. "What r blue balls?" I write and send on to the Birds and Bees text line. I wait with bated breath, and sure enough, the next morning, I awake to this: "It's slang for when a guy is sexually excited, but doesn't ejaculate (cum), he sometimes gets an achy feeling in his testicles and lower abdomen." OMG! I mean, of course, I already knew this, but while my adult brain is thinking, "What a helpful, efficient service?" my inner ado-