

Frightening realities of sex and young people

nzherald.co.nz | 15 November 2017

Prominent Tauranga sexual abuse counsellor Denise McEnteer talks to Carly Gibbs about the frightening realities of sex and our children.

She's gone to bed. Lights are out. Someone is keeping her up though. Under the sheets a blue light flickers. Should she send it? She pauses. She sends. It's a deep breath that follows. Time is endless. There's no reply. In the morning; at school, everything's not okay.

Denise McEnteer meets us on the roadside at the end of her long driveway. In vibrant clothes, she ushers us down a gravelly slope to her private oasis.

Down some wooden steps, and into a cosy mauve-painted room, which smells of aromatherapy. Open windows stretch out to touch restless greenery.

Here is her sanctuary and safe place.

But what she's got to say isn't zen.

At 61, she's racked up 40 years as a sexual abuse counsellor in Tauranga and Australia. Her stories of sex and sexting (the sending of sexually explicit images and messages), aren't for the faint-hearted, but she's a woman who tells the truth regardless of the reaction.

She works with clients aged 13 up, referred to her by police, schools, community agencies, parents and ACC.

Her observations are sobering for a parent: Pre-teens are learning about sex through pornography. McEnteer says the average age of being sexually active is between 10 and 11.

Girls as young as 9 are sending "nudies" (nude photographs of themselves).

Oral sex isn't considered sex by some teens. More teens are experimenting with violent sex.

And most alarming, adults are setting kids up to be raped and making money from it.

"I think a lot of parents would be absolutely horrified by what's going on and perhaps think that I'm sensationalising the situation; and perhaps even be traumatised in reading some of this stuff."

It would be a natural reaction to say: "Well, thank God my kids are not like that!"

Read on.

Technology is changing the game.

Backing her up is safety non-profit group NetSafe, which says lots of young people feel pressured to share intimate images.

McEnteer is aware of children as young as 9 sexting, and says suicide is among the most extreme outcomes of sexual experimentation.

"Kids are learning very quickly how to mask, how to be surreptitious, how to sneak around, how to text their parents and say they're with 'Jenny', when actually they're not.

"A lot of teens have multiple phones. I've worked with teenagers that have got four of them and the parents only know about one."

From her couch, she is seeing an increase in clients because of the impact of technology, and issues are becoming more complex and high impact.

McEnteer has the skills. She's spent 20 years working in New Zealand and 20 in Australia. She was part of the inaugural team which set up the Centre Against Sexual Assault (Casa) in Melbourne.

The centre was a world leader after just four years, and operated with a team of seven specialists.

She was the brainchild of an after-hours sexual assault telephone counselling service in the state of Victoria, which now also co-ordinates South Australia.

She prepares rape victims for court trials and, in 2009, her research was used as the basis to develop the Sexual Assault Primary Prevention two-year programme, initiated by the Tauranga City Council's "Tauranga Safe City".

Her female clients outweigh males, but the number of young men she's seeing has increased.

Are teens learning?

"Absolutely, but it's a bit like we're shutting the stable after the horse has already bolted." Perhaps controversially, she wants to scrap sex education in the teenage years, and start when kids are 9 or 10.

"We do know now, that our sex education is through pornography. Because by the time the teachers are able to do sex education, we're well into college years. By then, a lot of them have already engaged in sexual intimacy."

McEnteer is frank and unapologetic for it. She applauds the "Me too" or "#MeToo" hashtag used on social media in October to denounce sexual assault and harassment, in the wake of sexual misconduct allegations against Harvey Weinstein. What's happening in Tauranga is a "microcosm" of the wider picture.

"We can't assume it isn't happening here because we're a smaller city."

A *1 News* report earlier this year, detailing adults setting kids up to be repeatedly raped and making money from it in New Zealand, is something she's aware of locally.

"I've worked with clients whose parents are pimping them out to close family members. It's pretty horrific."

In some cases, the children are underage.

"There are also young women, well under the age of consent, pimping themselves out for alcohol and drugs and I'm working with those. Some are still in school."

Furthermore, she's aware of instances where both a male and female have collaborated to lure in a young teenager for sex.

"I've had kids, well they're teenagers now, that have talked to me about being the age of 5 and while their mum is having sex, they're required to crawl along the floor next to the bed and rifle through the [man's] wallet."

To add further shock value, she's aware of kids being made to watch adults having sex.

"So it's desensitising them so they can pimp out the kid."

She admits those are the extremes.

More common and relatable is sexting and its fallout.

According to NetSafe, a fifth of teens have been asked for naked or nearly nude images in the past year - but less than 5 per cent have actually sent them.

Despite that, 40 per cent of teens aged 14 to 17 say they know someone who has.

Thirty per cent of those who responded to the study felt there was peer pressure to participate in sexting.

"There's a gulf and a gap between how (us as parents) use technology and how our kids do.

"We will pay for Netflix, and phones, and top-ups for our kids, but we won't pay for an expert adult to come in and access what our kids are doing on the devices that we buy them."

Violence in pornography has escalated, and boys in particular need to be educated on the fact that pornography is acting.

She tells the story of a 14-year-old client who came to her because she wanted to know if her first sexual experience was normal.

She was asked to be put into a cage, tied up like a dog and sodomised. The age of her sexual partner? 15.

"It's pretty frightening, eh?"

Girls talk about giving guys oral sex as not being sex. She's heard of girls as young as 9

sending nude photos. And males using technology to set up sexual assaults and drink-spiking.

Many send photos on Snapchat believing it to be a quick glance, but forget photos can be saved, and then suddenly it's shared around the school. "That's a common one, unfortunately."

McEnteer works strictly 9am to 5pm and her friends and family, and love of music, are critical to her ability to soak in some hair-raising stuff.

She drinks a lot of water. Takes vitamins. Is an "enormous" sleeper. Gets a massage once a week. Walks on the beach with therapy dog Astro. Visits the hot pools. Likes to ride motorbikes. She's confident and transparent: "I'm not a new graduate; I'm not a newbie. Over the years I've seen thousands of people in two countries, so with that comes practice wisdom."

Her only child, Ben, died suddenly in Melbourne four years ago this Boxing Day.

"If Ben had died and I was new to [this line of work], there's no way I could have coped with it".

She has a blue Iris tattooed on her forearm in memory of Ben and her partner, Mark, who died six years ago from motor neuron disease.

Speaking out is something that comes naturally. As a child, she and her four siblings were encouraged to partake in robust debate at the dinner table.

"We were allowed to purposely take the opposing view to our parents just to keep that debate going and to learn."

Born and raised in Tauranga in a community-minded Catholic family, a passing parade of missionaries came and stayed, encouraging her to not only travel but access different bodies of knowledge.

She broke out of the Catholic church at 14 because she couldn't be an altar boy.

At 19, she joined The Sisters Overseas Service.

SOS was a pro-abortion organisation which helped women fly to Australia to obtain legal abortions.

"Women had become pregnant as a result of rape. That's when my eyes were first opened to this [line of work]."

She later completed qualifications in nursing, social work, counselling and holistic healing and went travelling, returning to New Zealand as assistant matron at Dey Street Girls Home, a welfare home.

She fought to have female doctors replace male doctors, and blood tests replace pap smears - something that was mandatory to allow the girls to leave lockup and enter the residential home.

Years on, she's still fighting for change.

Parents need to be role-modelling their own usage of technology, and stop being digitally distracted.

Talk to your kids, no matter how awkward you feel.

"We need to traverse that barrier ASAP.

"We can't underestimate the power of peer pressure. It becomes that interchange between young people. They're not really sure of their sexuality, but they are using the technology as part of that experimental stage."

Gone in a flash, a text or Facebook message will ping its way around the school, around Tauranga, and worse than that, who knows.

Police comment

Detective Inspector David Kirby, manager adult sexual assault and child protection, says nationally, police have investigated two cases where it is alleged that parents or caregivers have received payment or reward for allowing their children to be sexually exploited.

One is before the courts and the second is still under investigation.

Police encourage anyone who feels they may have been sexually abused to report it to police.

Visit: www.denisemcenteer.com

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11942340