

sexpressions

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WINTER | 2006

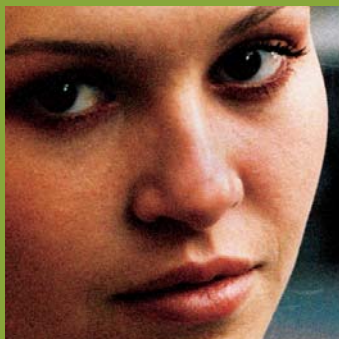
A MAGAZINE FOR INTERVENERS
AND EDUCATORS WHO ARE OFFERING
SEX-EDUCATION ACTIVITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
OF SECONDARY-SCHOOL AGE

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INTIMACY IN ADOLESCENT SEXUAL RELATIONS: The distinctive features of orogenital relations

BY
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Oral sex is a more common practice, or at least one that has become integrated into the sexual behaviour of adolescent boys and girls at an earlier age. It is important to bring adolescents to look at the motives that lead them to practice oral sex and to recognize the necessity of progression in intimate and sexual contacts.



Charlotte, who is 13 years old, knows that her friend Cassandra regularly performs fellatio on a boy. Charlotte doesn't agree with this practice. When she let Cassandra know what she thought, the latter answered: "Anyway, oral sex isn't really sex." Cassandra also added that Charlotte should do the same thing because then the boys would consider her to be 'hot'.

Scenario inspired by episode No. 115 of the soap opera *Un monde à part*, broadcast on Radio-Canada on 29 September 2004

What do you think of this situation? Where, in your view, lies the problem? What do you think of Cassandra's attitude? What do you think of her view of the practice of oral sex?

Oral sex seems to have become a more common practice, or at least one that has become integrated into the sexual behaviour of adolescent boys and girls at an earlier age.¹ This, no doubt, is due to the fact that this practice has become commonplace, particularly in magazines for adolescent girls. Such magazines no longer talk about the signs showing that a boy is interested in a girl, but rather about the tricks that can help him reach the seventh heaven. "Young girls confide that they have practiced fellatio in the pseudo-intimacy of a toilet stall, while at the same time revealing that they have never kissed a boy" (Chouinard, 2005). However, according to Jocelyne Robert (2005, p.117), a kiss is "an act that fundamentally involves an intimate relationship". In other words, they jump directly to this sexual practice even though, a priori, kissing seems less intimate. It also seems that the motivations behind the practice of oral sex are incongruent with the notion of intimacy being necessary for progression in the nature of sexual contact.

In fact, as we will see, adolescents do not necessarily see oral sex as constituting a sexual practice nor, moreover, do they immediately take into account the risks that might be associated with it. In tackling the theme of oral sex, this magazine wishes to show the importance of sensitizing adolescents to the necessity of reconsidering the motives that lead them to practice oral sex, to the necessity of progression in intimate and sexual contacts and, above all, to the particularly intimate character of the practice of oral sex.

**The practice of oral sex by adolescents
is a subject that may make a number of people uncomfortable
given the intimate nature of this sexual behaviour.
If you find it awkward to raise this subject with adolescents,
you would, no doubt, find the support of a sexologist helpful.
Do not hesitate to call upon other qualified people
within the school system for this kind of intervention.²**

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1. By oral sex we mean "all kinds of sexual practices involving the mouth or the tongue" (Tremblay, 2004) of one person and the genital organs of another person. Oral sex performed on a man is called fellatio. Oral sex performed on a woman is called cunnilingus. Moreover, we use the terms receiving or giving oral sex to distinguish the respective roles of the partners involved in oral sex: the person who gives oral sex is the active partner and the person who receives it is the passive partner (Canadian AIDS Society, 2005).
2. In schools, the staff of complementary educational services (the staff member in spiritual care and guidance and community involvement services, the nurse, etc.) through the prevention and promotion programme, may contribute either by collaborating with the teacher or offering extracurricular animation, for example.

INTIMACY AND SEXUALITY

Since the presence or absence of intimacy has a direct influence on the nature of the contacts between partners, there is good reason to deal with the idea of intimacy in sexual relations in general before dealing more specifically with the practice of oral relations between adolescents.

Intimacy can be described with the help of certain key terms such as the motivation to seek intimacy, and capacity and tolerance for intimacy. According to McAdams (1980), the motivation to seek intimacy reflects a yearning for warm exchanges in which intimacy itself represents a goal. For Schnarch (1991), it is a question of a need for interpersonal contacts linked to tolerance for intimacy. As for Reis and Shaver (1988), they present intimacy as an interpersonal process in which interaction between two partners is based on the partners' experiences and the expressions of their feelings. These interactions occur with the help of both verbal and non-verbal communication, and allow people to get closer to each other, which opens the door for them to be open about themselves.

Prager (1995) proposes a multi-layered concept of the capacity for intimacy. She translates this concept into intimate interactions and intimate relationships.

Intimate interactions are the verbal or non-verbal exchanges between two persons in which one or both partners share something private or personal with the other. Intimate interactions are based on a feeling of affective, perceptive and cognitive well being before, during and after the exchanges.

Intimate relationships, imply relationships that last some time and are characterized by a history of repeated intimate interactions. They are also characterized by affection, trust, and oneness. Thériault (1995) makes it clear that the capacity for intimacy, which reflects intra-psychic intimacy, allows the inclusion of notions of emotional proximity, sharing, self-revelation, and experiences that are especially connected with intimacy. In other words, when two people reveal themselves to each other by sharing their feelings and emotions, a psychological proximity is created that allows these persons to experience intimacy. As for Bureau (1995, p. 2), he stresses that "the capacity for intimacy enhances [...] the special ability of naming and expressing all that there is in your subjective

consciousness, and of risking the opening up of your own consciousness through encounter with another consciousness." He adds that "intimacy also requires authentic personhood, the capacity to consult one's internal frame of references, self confidence and confidence in the other, as well as a good dose of humility so as not to impose one's own view on the other." The internal frame of reference comprises an individual's values, perceptions, opinions, and so on.

The kind of intimacy advocated involves an interpersonal process and interaction between two partners that includes emotional closeness, sharing, and self revelation. More than anything else, intimacy is a matter of the presence of a feeling of well-being and of confidence in the affective, perceptive, and cognitive realms, before, during and after exchanges.

The practice of oral sex implies, therefore, a certain intimacy with more or less commitment on the interpersonal and emotional levels. We will discuss this later. But what about the frequency of oral sex among the young?



THE PRACTICE OF ORAL SEX AMONG ADOLESCENTS

A study of sexual health, HIV, and AIDS in young people published by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) in 2003, showed that in secondary III, 28% of girls and 32% of boys had had orogenital relations, while 19% of girls and 23% of boys had had sexual relationships with vaginal penetration. Still according to the same study, 53% of boys and 52% of girls in secondary V had had orogenital relations at least once, while 40% of boys and 46% of girls had had sexual relationships with vaginal penetration at least once.

Various studies carried out in the United States on a large group of boys aged 15 to 19 years have recorded an increase in the practice of oral sex, and especially of fellatio, since the end of the 1980s (Gates and Sonenstein, 2000; Schwartz, 1999). From then on, not only did the practice of oral sex become more common, but it also became more frequent than vaginal penetration (Halpern-Felsher et al., 2005). This claim agrees with data gathered by different authors, which reveal that 7% to 24% of adolescent boys and girls who are still virgins have had oral sex, either giving or receiving this kind of fondling (Newcomer and Udry, 1985; Breakwell and Fife-Shaw, 1992; Schuster, Bell, and Kanouse, 1996; Gates and Sonenstein, 2000).

And while on this subject, the number of partners constitutes another important element to consider. Among adolescents, it is higher for oral sex than for sexual relations with vaginal penetration (Prinstein et al., 2003).

Furthermore, adolescents seem to believe that there are fewer risks in terms of physical and emotional health with oral sex than with vaginal penetration (Halpern-Felsher et al., 2005). What is more, they would be less inclined to use protection methods during orogenital intercourse than during strictly genital intercourse, since the risks of contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or HIV seems to them to be less. (Remez, 2000; Prinstein et al., 2003).

To sum up, adolescents' perception of the practice of oral sex is very different indeed from their perception of vaginal penetration. Thus, according to Remez (2000), oral sex seems to them to be a less intimate or less serious gesture than vaginal penetration, which is reserved for a special person. Moreover, it seems that their peers consider adolescents who say they have had orogenital intercourse to be popular (Prinstein et al., 2003); but, for all that, they do not appreciate them more (Prinstein et al., 2003). In other words, other adolescents may find them "hot", but not want to be like them.

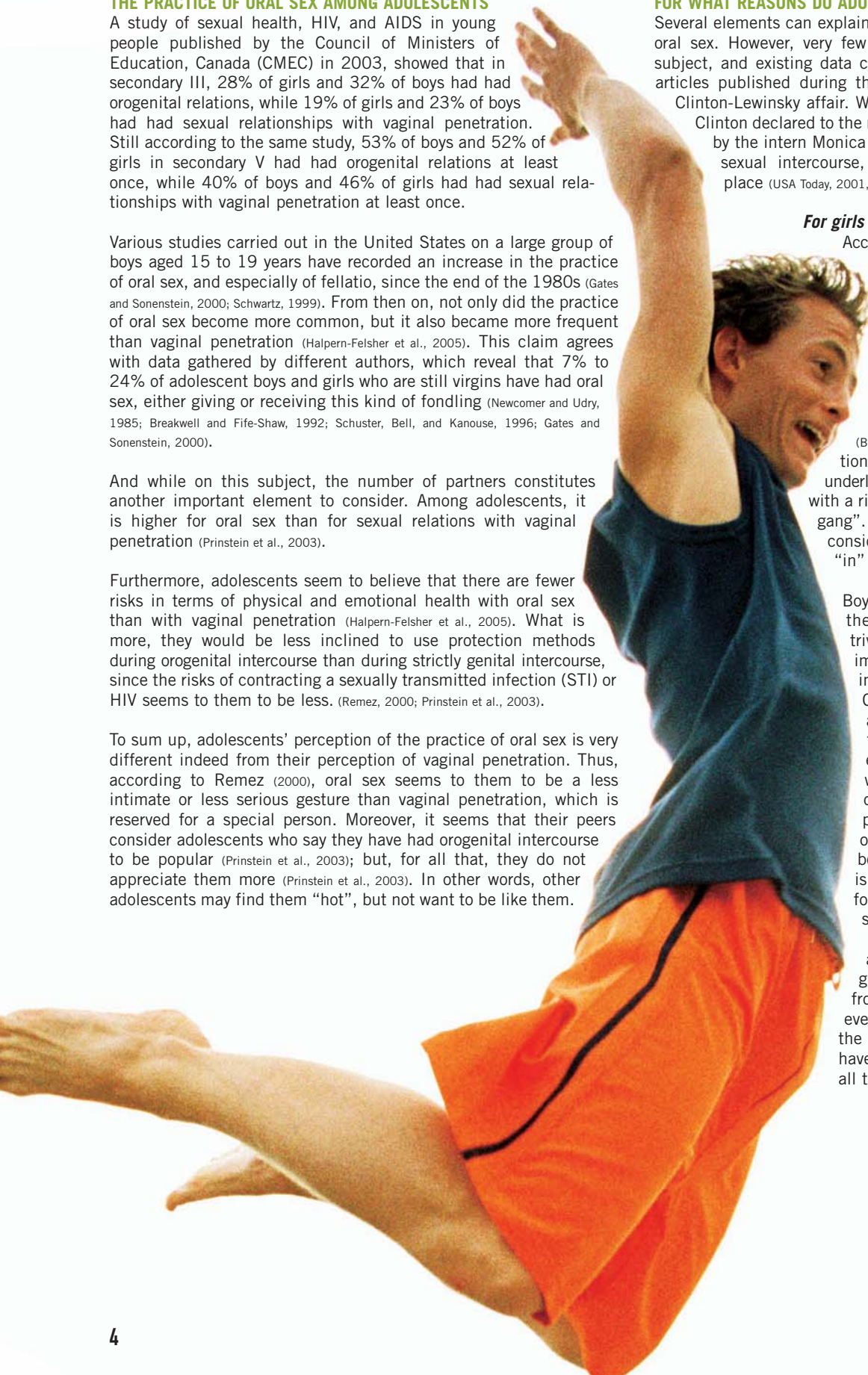
FOR WHAT REASONS DO ADOLESCENTS PRACTICE ORAL SEX?

Several elements can explain what motivates adolescents to practice oral sex. However, very few scientific studies have looked at this subject, and existing data come mainly from numerous newspaper articles published during the last five years, especially since the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. We remember that at the time, President Clinton declared to the media that the fellatio performed on him by the intern Monica Lewinsky could not be considered to be sexual intercourse, because no vaginal penetration took place (USA Today, 2001, cited by Isabelle Hachey, 2004).

For girls

According to Boivin (2004), one of the principal reasons that girls give fellatio is to ward off a boy who is too pushy and who wants to have sexual intercourse with vaginal penetration. This tactic allows girls to put off sexual intercourse with vaginal penetration until later. By practicing oral sex, adolescents keep their virginity (Hachey, 2004) and, at the same time, avoid unplanned pregnancy (Boivin, 2004; Hachey, 2004). In another connection, Boivin (2004) and Nebenzahl (2003) underline the fact that fellatio can be associated with a rite of initiation, to "become a part of the gang". The girl agrees to perform fellatio to be considered "cool" or to become one of the "in" students of the school (Nebenzahl, 2003).

Boys demand fellatio, and girls give in to their demands. Adolescents, in sum, trivialize oral sex. For this reason it is important to make them aware of the intimate nature of this sexual practice. Contact between one person's mouth and another person's genital organs is far from being a banal gesture. This erotic exchange occurs within a relationship with another person that, admittedly, one hopes will be a love affair. But the practice of oral sex cannot be associated only with love affairs or couples. It has become excessively trivialized (done, that is, to be seen as 'hot', or because boys ask for it, etc.). It represents an exchange of sexual services, a form of sexual consumption. We are thus getting far away from shared intimacy. Moreover, girls who give in to this special request from certain boys can become, without even really being aware of it, the objects of the boys' contempt. Adolescent girls can have a lot of difficulty coming to terms with all these elements.



It is worth remembering in this respect that, as far as emotions are concerned, the period between the ages of 12 and 17 is one of heightened excitation and perturbation. This is when we first fall in love, and first experience passion, the desire to please, and attraction to another person. Our feelings are confused; we feel desire, fear and joy mixed with anxiety, enthusiasm, and even guilt, all at the same time (Centre québécois de coordination sur le sida, 1999). Consequently, girls agree to fellatio because they believe that the boy in question cares for them and because, despite a certain confusion about and discomfort with this practice, they hope to please him.

It is also true that in adolescence, and even more in adulthood, many people confuse love and lust. Jocelyne Robert (2005, p. 41) has written: "Love is more than affection sprinkled on top of sexual desire. It involves the participation and investment of the whole being, body, heart, and soul. The loving couple becomes a unit independent of the sum of the two. Love is greater than the people who experience it." Adolescents, and especially girls, do not always make this distinction; they confuse love with their partner's sexual desire. Consequently, they offer to perform fellatio on him as a proof of a love that they believe is reciprocated.

For boys

The great majority of data about orogenital relations refer to fellatio practiced by girls. Because we lack data on the practice of cunnilingus by boys we are unable to say much about the oral sex practices of boys, nor on their motivations for performing it.

We can, however, assume that cunnilingus is a less common sexual practice because girls do not ask for it. When it comes to oral sex, adolescent girls seem to play an active rather than a passive role. Is this because they feel obliged to be active? It is the case, as we have seen, that some boys demand fellatio. Moreover, a number of adolescent girls are not only ignorant about their own sexual anatomy, but also feel a certain disdain for their genital organs. This may explain, in part, why a boy's oral caresses provoke shame and discomfort in her.

There is, therefore, good reason to carry out several investigations. Is the lower frequency of cunnilingus associated with refusal on the part of boys, or of girls? What risks and issues does the practice of cunnilingus pose for the psychological health of boys and girls? Do boys and girls have the same fears about this sexual practice, or are their fears different?

AND WHAT ABOUT PLEASURE IN ALL THIS?

Though the practice of oral sex can be associated with negative motivations, it can also be linked to a certain number of positive benefits. Thus, according to a study carried out by the University of California (Halpern-Felsher, 2005), adolescents mention the following benefits: to experience pleasure (59%), to feel good about yourself (40%), to improve the relationship between a couple (40%) and, finally, to be more popular (27%). The search for pleasure is a perfectly valid motivation for the practice of oral sex; the other motivations mentioned, however, are surprising and raise questions.

In fact, the motivations linked to the practice of oral sex do not seem to be consistent with the notion that intimacy is needed for progression of sexual contacts. In effect, the desire to please is confused with sexual desire and with love. Intimacy as we have defined it seems to be excluded from adolescents' discourse. The practice of oral sex reflects mainly peer pressure in the context of the exploration and trivialization of this practice, and the search for sexual pleasure that can be obtained from this practice, particularly by boys.





THE POSSIBLE RISKS OF THE PRACTICE OF ORAL SEX

As noted earlier, adolescents are less inclined to use protection during orogenital contacts, because the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and HIV seems lower to them (Remez, 2000; Prinstein et al., 2003; Halpern-Felsher et al., 2005). According to the study carried out by the CMEC, 45% of boys and 44% of girls in secondary III know that one can get genital herpes from orogenital intercourse. According to Halpern-Felsher et al., adolescents who intend to try oral sex are less aware of the dangers of contracting an STI than those who do not intend to try it (30.9% vs. 40.9%). Clinicians, however, report a rise in the number of STIs, and in particular of syphilis, contracted through orogenital contact.

As for HIV, it is true that the risks of contracting it are somewhat low, unless the person giving oral sex has lesions in the mouth (Canadian AIDS Society, 2005). In this case, the risk of contracting HIV increases, because the lesion provides a portal of entry for the virus present in sexual secretions such as pre-ejaculatory fluid, semen, and vaginal secretions. Even if, in fact, HIV transmission through orogenital intercourse is infrequent, such intercourse presents a high risk for the transmission of certain STIs, and in particular gonorrhoea, syphilis, hepatitis A, herpes, and condylomas. "In all sexual activities in which one person's mouth touches another person's penis, vagina, or anus, there is a large risk of contracting other STIs. One can reduce this risk by using a latex condom (preferably non-lubricated), either by putting it on the penis, or by cutting the condom lengthwise, opening it out, and putting it on the vulva (making sure that the opening to the vagina is covered)" (Canadian AIDS Society, 2005, p. 5-6).

THE EFFECTS OF THE PRACTICE OF ORAL SEX ON PSYCHOAFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

In addition to posing risks for the physical health of adolescents, the practice of oral sex poses risks for their psychological and affective health that should not be neglected. Thus adolescent girls may feel ashamed of having performed fellatio on a boy who did not attract them originally, and may feel humiliated by his failure to acknowledge the services rendered. This may lead to disgust for sexual activity, and mistrust of future sexual relations. These same adolescent girls may also feel abandoned, and therefore dissatisfied with sexuality.

As stressed by Chouinard (2005, p. 2), when the subject of adolescent sexuality is discussed, it is “never a question of happiness, but of performance, domination, social pressures, infections ... and the search for love.” For Robert (2005, p. 13), it is as if “you had lost your bearings, the sense of distance and rituals, the sense of a time for waiting and a time for desire, the sense of taste, the sense of happiness and of the sacred, the exceptional and of moments of grace, and maybe especially the sense of the value of values. The zeitgeist calls for immediacy, uniformity, anything permitted anytime, right away, all alone, and very blunt!” In the context of orogenital intercourse, this quote reflects the advantage of progression in sexual contacts. As we have stated above, the trivialization of oral sex is such that adolescents sometimes engage in this sexual practice before they have even kissed someone for the first time. Yet, a kiss “brings the soul, thoughts, and feelings of the other closer. It links feeling and sensation, and distils consciousness awareness between two beings. Many people see the kiss as the way to introduce affectionate communication into sexual relations.”

Participants in a recent study carried out by Halpern-Felsher et al. and cited above seem to associate psychoaffective risks more with vaginal penetration than with oral sex. More of them, in fact, mention the risks that the couple relationship could deteriorate, that they could acquire a poor reputation, or experience problems or feel guilty in the case of sexual intercourse with vaginal penetration. This lack of awareness of the consequences of the practice of oral sex shows the need for educational interventions so as to inform adolescents of these risks and, consequently, of the importance of protecting themselves just as for intercourse with vaginal penetration.

NOT ALL ADOLESCENTS HAVE ORAL INTERCOURSE

Of course, not adolescents practice oral sex. Moreover, discussions of sexuality, and more particularly explicit discussions of sexual practices, make a number of them ill at ease. In fact, without being ignorant of oral sex, many adolescents have never heard the word fellatio (Boivin, 2004). In your interventions, you must take care not to think all adolescents are at the same level, so as to not exacerbate their discomfort. Moreover, some of them may feel intimidated by having to discuss oral sexuality in front of their peers. For these reasons, it is important that interventions be conducted with respect, nuance, and delicacy. That being so, it should be made clear that peer pressure concerning several forms of sexual practices, including oral sex, is felt even by those who are not yet sexually active.

THE BEST TYPE OF INTERVENTION

The perceptions, comments, and behaviours of adolescents show that they trivialize the practice of oral sex. It seems, then, to be of first importance that educational interventions should focus on sensitizing them to the intimate nature of this sexual practice. What characterizes intimacy is emotional closeness; the willingness to open oneself to another; a feeling of well being before, during and after intimate contact; and affection, trust, oneness, and sharing between partners. It is not a question of presenting oral intercourse in a negative light, but of orienting the intervention on the fact that oral intercourse should not be treated as trivially as it is.

The question of the risks, both physical and psychoaffective, that are incurred with oral sex should also be broached so as to equip the adolescents usefully for dealing with these risks. Though the risks of STI and HIV transmission remain relatively low, condom use is nonetheless advisable for oral intercourse. As far as the psychoaffective risks are concerned, the appropriate pedagogic approach seems to be one of helping adolescents figure out what motivates them to have oral sex and what pressures they experience to have it, and helping them demystify lust and pleasure. In sum, it is not a question of doing everything to be popular with others, or of believing that the quality of a relationship is linked to the diversity of sexual practices, or to conformity to the sexual desires of the other, etc.

With this in view, we propose interventions that aim to make adolescents reflect on what motivates them to adopt or refuse a particular sexual practice, so that they can begin to think critically about oral intercourse and, especially, that they become aware of its intimate character.

On the general subject of the trivialization of certain sexual activities among adolescents (the sources of this trivialization, its repercussions, etc), we invite you to consult the issue of *Le petit Magazine de la formation personnelle et sociale* entitled *Les relations sexuelles adolescentes, est-ce banal?*, by Marie-Andrée Bossé, on the site www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/itss (click Documentation, then Professionnels de l'éducation).



Pedagogic Activities

The goal of the two activities that follow is to make adolescents aware of the intimate nature of oral sex. To instil an atmosphere of trust, it is important that you insist on the notion of respect (respect for others' ideas and opinions, mutual respect among adolescents, respect for the confidential nature of what is revealed, etc) and that, when required, you qualify the comments that the adolescents make.

It is also important to make it clear to them that the purpose of the questions posed in the context of these activities is not to pry into their private lives, but rather to understand the values and the stakes associated with this sexual practice.

The two activities comprising this intervention are designed for adolescents in secondary IV and V. Ideally, these two activities should be offered one after the other so as to assure coherent treatment of the subjects raised.



For secondary school teachers, here are references points to the Québec Education Program in the Context of Education Reform.

TEACHING DOMAIN

Personal development domain:
moral education

GENERAL TRAINING DOMAIN

Health and well-being

CROSS-COMPETENCIES

- Exercising critical judgment
- Achieving self-potential, and communicating in an appropriate manner

ACTIVITY 1

Notion of Intimacy

DURATION
45 minutes

OBJECTIVES

- Sensitize adolescents to the notion of intimacy related to sexuality

1

Ask adolescents the question, “*What does the word ‘intimacy’ mean?*” and write the answers on a large sheet or a board.

(5 minutes)

2

Briefly outline what the notion of intimacy represents, making links with the answers given by the adolescents. Take special care to mention the key words used by various authors to facilitate their comprehension.

(10 minutes)

3

Give the adolescents a sheet listing 10 sexual acts and practices that are intimate in nature (see below). Ask each adolescent to classify the items in this list by degree of intimacy each item implies for them, with number 1 being the most intimate, and number 10 being the least intimate.

List of sexual acts and practices

Kissing someone on the cheek
Holding someone’s hand
Kissing someone on the lips
Fondling someone’s sexual organs
Having sexual intercourse with vaginal penetration
Performing fellatio or cunnilingus
Fondling the upper part of someone’s body
Lying down naked against someone
Sleeping in someone’s arms
Undressing (stripping naked) in front of someone

(5 minutes)

4

Lead a discussion on the classification of the intimate gestures listed above. Make it clear to adolescents that they are not obliged to reveal their classification to answer the following questions:

- *Did you find it difficult to make this classification? For what reasons?*
- *What item or items would you have added or taken away?*

(10 minutes)

5

Ask the adolescents to form little groups of about four persons each that are not mixed by sex, and to **discuss the following questions**:

- *What fosters intimacy for you? How could you develop intimacy with another person?*
- *Do boys experience intimacy in the same way that girls do?*
- *What link(s) can you make between elements in the definition of intimacy seen above and sexual practices, especially oral intercourse?*

(20 minutes)

6

Conclude the discussion by reminding students that it is possible to express emotions linked to sexuality by caresses and kisses without always ending up with oral or vaginal penetration.



DURATION

environ 1 h 15

OBJECTIVES

To get adolescents to:

- Identify the motivations that push them to practice oral sex;
- Begin thinking critically about their motivations for practicing oral sex;
- Identify the risks, both to physical and psychoaffective health, associated with the practice of oral sex.

Motivations and Risks

ACTIVITY 2

1

Ask the adolescents to **form unmixed teams** of about four persons each. **Distribute a sheet with the scenario³** presented at the beginning **and the following questions:**

- *What do think of Cassandra's attitude?*
- *What do think of Charlotte's attitude?*
- *Does this situation represent the real world of adolescent sexuality?*
- *For what reasons do girls engage in oral sex?*
- *For what reasons do boys engage in oral sex?*

Make it clear that the teams will share their answers afterwards in a plenary session. The adolescents may also individually and anonymously note their answers, which the animator will then read to the group.

(20 minutes)

2

PLENARY

Gather the responses to the questions. On a board **write the reasons given** by the girls and those given by the boys, in two separate columns. Then ask them the following questions:

- *What do you notice?*
- *In what respects are the reasons different or similar?*
- *Are there better and not so good reasons for engaging in oral sex?*

(10 minutes)

3

Briefly discuss the motivations for engaging in oral sex, completing the list with any the adolescents did not mention.

(5 minutes)

4

Ask them to **reply individually** to the following questions:

- *In what ways do I agree or disagree with the classification of motivations that has just been made?*
- *Which of these items could constitute a motivation for me? For what reason(s)?*
- *Which of them do not constitute a motivation for me? For what reason(s)?*

(5 minutes)

5

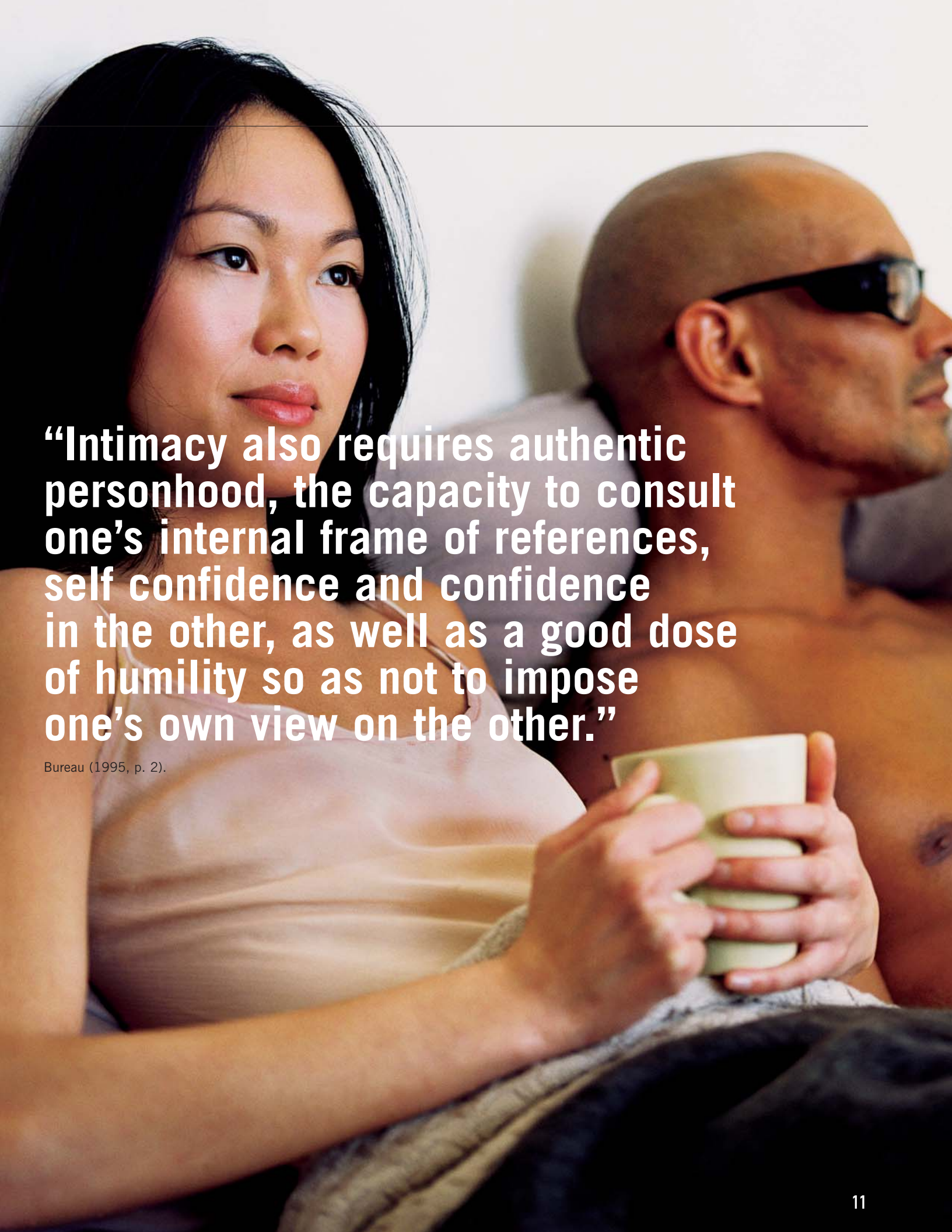
Briefly outline the advantages and risks, in terms of physical and psychoaffective health, that are linked to the practice of oral sex.

(5 minutes)

6

Conclude by stressing the intimate nature of this practice, and the importance of trusting the other person before engaging in any kind of sexual practice. As Duquet (2003) stresses, a sexual encounter is, above all else, an encounter with another person that engages his or her feelings, sense of decency, and history.

3. The scenario may be replaced by the article "Ados au pays de la porno", by Marie-Andrée Chouinard, published in the newspaper Le Devoir on Saturday April 16 and Sunday April 17, 2005.

A photograph of a woman and a man sitting together. The woman, on the left, has long dark hair and is looking towards the right. She is holding a light green cup with both hands. The man, on the right, is bald and wearing sunglasses, looking towards the right. He is shirtless. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

“Intimacy also requires authentic personhood, the capacity to consult one’s internal frame of references, self confidence and confidence in the other, as well as a good dose of humility so as not to impose one’s own view on the other.”

Bureau (1995, p. 2).



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