

POWER OF PREVENTION: EPISODE 18

BUILDING STRONG FUTURES: PROACTIVE CONVERSATIONS HELP YOUNG PEOPLE NAVIGATE SOCIAL PRESSURES

Christin D'Ovidio:

Welcome to The Power of Prevention podcast. In each podcast, we will go deeper into the topic of prevention in New Hampshire. We'll share our best interviews with you, of people who are working tirelessly for their professions, their families, and their communities to stop something unwanted from happening. In this case, substance misuse. This is a podcast for people who are looking for solutions and want to make New Hampshire a better place where we all have the opportunity to live, learn, and thrive. We are hoping to make your lives a little better with these inspirational stories about substance misuse prevention.

Cindy Pierce is a New Hampshire comic, storyteller, author and sexuality educator. She grew up in a big family where she learned the value of humor to survive, which is a great skill when it comes to talking about a topic that makes many people, especially young people, uncomfortable. Cindy's career began in 2004. It started when she developed a comedy solo show telling stories about giving birth, marriage, parenting, and aging, things she knew about. Then, her niece and nephew invited her to speak to their friends. Cindy's candid. She's a salt of the earth kind of nature, and she disarmed these young people. And soon, they were sharing their struggles about finding intimacy, connection and coping. As she was exposed to the storyline of their lives, she realized how misinformed many people are about their bodies and their expectations about relationships. She saw firsthand how young people struggle to navigate their social lives online and off, and that young people do not make one choice at a time. They make multiple choices that could put them at risk. These challenges are magnified by the influences of internet porn, peer pressure, and access to substances.

Ms. Pierce is passionate about the role caregivers play in onboarding young people into the adult world, acting as strong anchors to develop coping skills and resilience, beginning at an early age. According to Cindy, keeping conversations going with kids is an investment in their healthy futures, helping them make the best choices possible when faced with challenges. Open conversations are the first line of defense in the prevention of substance use. Cindy is frequently a guest speaker at high schools and parenting programs. We are excited that she's joined us to share what she's doing to make a difference and what you can do too to support young people. After this interview, I think you will agree her wit, humor and passion are infectious.

We're really excited to have you with us today, Cindy. Thank you so much, much. We're really interested to hear about what you're doing for families and for young people. So, welcome.

Cindy Pierce:

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Christin D'Ovidio:

So, let's go back to how did you get into this work?

Cindy Pierce:

I think the social contract for young people starting in high school, and certainly into college and beyond, is the combination of hooking up with alcohol. Alcohol being the substance people use to make themselves more socially comfortable, to talk to a potential partner, to actually use it to influence a person to do things they may not have been interested in doing sober. Some people using alcohol to actually allow themselves to do things they actually didn't want to do sober. So, it's kind of this accepted, normalized use of alcohol to facilitate hookup culture. And obviously, the risks for sexual assault, for

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surviving a sexual assault, for committing sexual assault are so high, really something that all schools are struggling to resolve, and colleges. But I think also the below-average sex was a big part of it. That's something that is just standard for people. And really, hookup culture isn't about the sex, it's more about the social credibility and getting it done and getting numbers and a body count and that's the unfortunate thing.

And what I've learned in this almost 20 years now is that young people, they want to be good at sex, they want to know how it really works and they think they just need to practice it a bunch. But when you practice below-average sex, it becomes your practice. And alcohol is a big part of why it's below average. And so, I want to give them information about pleasure, about their bodies, about consent, about communication, and just talking about what really healthy relationships look like. And that involves practicing social courage, being able to in a social environment, not even a sexual environment, to understand boundaries, to read cues, to accept a no, and how that converts to their sexual relationships. So, it kind of is a collision of factors. Social media being a big part of it as well. So, I kind of travel in all those topics with social courage kind of being the thread through it all.

Christin D'Ovidio:

That plays in so much to what we are doing here at The Partnership when we're telling caring adults that care for a young person, that their words really matter and that having a conversation with young people is important, that they are listening to them. Can you talk more about that important role that adults play and that educators play too, how that can maybe counter and overcome what they're fighting, which is social media, right?

Cindy Pierce:

Parents and caregivers so often give up and assume, "Oh, there's not much I can say. It's too overwhelming." But actually, the research shows that kids are interested in what we think. And also, there's parents who worry about being uncool. I say to parents, embrace your age, embrace being not cool, lean into uncool because it gives you freedom to have clear boundaries with your kids and to hold your rules. But I think if we don't speak up, the internet wins, the culture wins, social media wins, influencers win. So, the research says if we keep speaking up, and it's not just one talk about alcohol and drugs, it's not one talk about social media. It's not the talk around sex. It's many conversations over time.

And kids don't retain much in those conversations. And of course, these conversations are awkward and of course they're kind of painful, especially if you have a snarky teenager who is not that psyched to... They're not tuned in with you, and so they come home from school with their snark and you don't want to add to the snark, you want to make it better. But really, we need to lean into these conversations and they pay off. And even when a kid has got their hand out resisting and telling you, "I don't want to talk about this," they secretly do want to know what we think. And I always say that they can't unhear what you say. And one mom said to me after my talk, she said, "You know what? I realized I hadn't talked to my kid about sex." And obviously, the car in the dark is a great place, but there's always the chance you get to a stop sign, your kid's going to roll out.

This mom said to her kid, "Hey, there's a whole lot I want you to know. There's a whole lot I haven't told you. So, once a week, we're going to sit on the couch for five minutes and we're going to face front. You don't have to ask questions, but when the timer goes off, you set the timer, I can add nothing and we will part our ways." So, for three weeks she said, "This is what we're going to do." And of course, the timer went off, he bolted. But then, she had tenderized him into awkward conversation. And this is modeling

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social courage, right? That it's awkward. That despite the consequences, I'm going to do this anyway.

Christin D'Ovidio:

What if you don't know the answer to a question they have?

Cindy Pierce:

This, I think is the big piece, that admitting what you don't know and say, "You know what? That is totally out of my realm." Our kids see us not knowing all the time, and that is such a gift to see us as fallible adults that don't have all the answers. And I think the problem for young people right now is they like to pretend that they know all these things. And people will be talking about things at school and they just nod their head, they tell me this, and then they go home and Google it. And when you Google something, you really can get off track quickly. There are great resources, but very quickly... Porn has got so many searches dialed in and that is the biggest sexuality miseducator out there. But internet porn is really getting people off track, so that's where it ends up.

So, another thing to say to kids is, "Wait a second, you're a teenager. You own a phone that is under my account. You have the privilege of having a phone and that privacy. You might even have the privilege of going to friends' houses with me driving you, or you have the privilege of driving..." There are a whole lot of privileges. My friend Vicky Hoefle, Parenting on Track, taught us this. You can say to your kid, "Oh, along with privileges come responsibilities, and some of those responsibilities are having difficult conversations that are awkward." And this is so freeing because at times I've had to say to our kids like, "Look, you want to be treated like you're 20, but you're acting like you're 11, stomping your foot and [inaudible 00:09:24]."

And it's like, "Look, the answer is yes, you can use the car as soon as we watch this TED Talk together, as soon as we have this conversation." And when you hold that line, they get used to it. But so many parents, I think, pull back and panic and back up because they don't want to make it difficult for their kids, or their kid has anxiety and they don't want to add to it. But really, it's grounding and comfortable to have clear boundaries and a fence that doesn't move all the time.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Through her speaking engagement, Cindy talks to a lot of young people and caregivers about the anxiety they feel to fit in. Feel worthy and matter to someone. Here she shares some of the insights she's gained about the important roles adults, educators, and parents play in helping young people make sense of the strong influences of social media, internet porn and the hookup culture.

Cindy Pierce:

We do know that kids who have more face-to-face time are less anxious, less stressed, and less depressed. I mean, for years that research has been out there. It's counterintuitive to so many people that actually having conversations early and often about sexuality, that because of the internet we need to be speaking to our kids between the ages of five and seven before they're exposed, to get them the idea of healthy sexuality. We talk about that in our family. Not all families are ready to do that, but there are great books for people of all kinds of values to have conversations with kids about healthy sexuality, so that before they're exposed to the internet, they're on solid ground because it's very difficult.

I still hear parents say, "Oh, well, I learned in fifth grade back in the '80s or the '70s. I think I'll just wait

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till then." And it's like, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. That is actually the problem. Back then, life was simpler. You weren't exposed to a lot. So, we have to respond to the internet. And talking about porn, that's later. But it really is third, fourth grade because even if you're not exposed at home, you have friends with phones. And phones are being handed to kids younger and younger, between what used to be wait till eighth, and then people were seventh, sixth. And parents wanting to be cool, giving kids phones younger.

Now, you're seeing kids around the country with phones at 10. And so, the unseen social lives of our children... Parents say, "My child would never do that. My child would never send a dick pic. My child would never engage in that kind of banter in a group chat." And they're shocked when it happens and they... It's the culture. It's not the parenting, but the parenting could start these conversations so that when it happens, you're ready. And the denial, you can't see it, so it's very comforting, but so much is going on out of sight.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Schools have a role to play too. Listen to her thoughts.

Cindy Pierce:

So, I think we're on a bit of a turn. For a long time, a small group of parents were saying, "Get phones out of the room." And teachers did collect phones, but kids get tricky. On their laptops they can get all their phone stuff, and they bring a different phone and drop that in the bag. There's all different ways kids avoid that. But actually, teenagers are really okay when everyone in the room doesn't have their phone. That's when they're actually at ease. Parents are the biggest issue about taking phones away, about putting phones away because they have to reach them. So, now parents feel like they need to reach their kids all day long. And schools, I'm seeing are going back to taking the phones and actually kids are relieved when we do it. And they fight it and they give you the snark, but just putting the phones away, it actually brings the pulse down.

And kids are not very good at self-regulating yet. We need to train kids the self-regulation of what they consume, how they interact, and how often they are on their phone. It's really tricky. They'll say it. They'll say it so hard. But with the adults, I think while their brains are developing we have every right to dictate that. I talk about the brain research that when our phones are on and visible, our brains are cranked up. When they're turned off and visible our brains only calm down a little. It's only when our phones are off and away do our brains settle down. And they really are looking for an exit ramp from this, but they can't do it on their own. They need the adults, the coaches to say, "We're not having phones at practice. They are done."

And I heard a story about a group of kids, ninth graders, who were being taken away for a retreat overnight, and the teacher spent two weeks debating, having meetings, "Should we keep their phones? Should we..." Back and forth. They finally said, "We're going to take their phones." They were so proud, they took the phones, kids got on the bus, they drove for 45 minutes. Kids were playing games, chatting, interacting. They had two days of great workshops, and they were so proud of themselves that they handed the kids the phones when they got on the bus. They drove the 45 minutes. When they got back to school, the kids got off the bus and said to the adults, "Why did you give our phones back? I was talking to a kid I've never spoken to. I was playing games with kids. Everyone just disappeared into their online lives."

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And once one kid pulls a phone out, they all do. And they will all agree, you feel left out and it's just like... So, one of my expert mentors talks about JOMO, the joy of missing out and how that we need to practice that, but the adults also need to model, that we're okay missing out and that things are going on without us. But also, to coach our kids with the joy of missing out and being mindful and not filling the void. I talk a lot about every young person wants to feel sexually relevant, socially relevant. They want to feel seen, heard, known, understood. And that's been the case for every generation, but this generation has a device that constantly reminds them what they could be, should be, would be if they had, if they did, if they bought, if they wore, and that's a bottomless pit.

And then, actually that could go on and drive you bonkers trying to fill that void. And people fill their voids in different ways, with alcohol, drugs, eating, not eating, sex, being perfect, exercise. There's all different ways, but it's so hard to feel enough and feel okay in the world, and that we actively have to recognize that. And to every day remind ourselves that the less time I have on this phone, the more okay I will feel.

Christin D'Ovidio:

What are the resources and tools that people that are caring for children or parents can support conversations, or start, or learn about this from?

Cindy Pierce:

Okay, there's a few resources that are... One is Our Kids Online, is a film, documentary film by a couple in New Zealand who did a terrific job. They had a blended family. They were facing the phone thing and they just went around the world doing research. I think that film is a great one. I think The Social Dilemma. And if people really want to know, Max Fisher wrote a book called The Chaos Machine, talking about not just the social implications, but the world wars, genocide, how social media has contributed to so much death and destruction because of what people believe. So, there's levels, of course. One thing that I think in the world of porn education, for a while the religious approach was separated from people. There was all different kind of factions, different takes. And I think the porn in education people are coming together. And Fight The New Drug is one. The Reward Foundation in England, and they have a lot of free resources for American schools and they talk about age verification around porn.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Many parents think it's safer to allow young people to drink in their presence, but Cindy challenges the idea that social hosting is a safer thing to do. Let's learn why it's not.

Cindy Pierce:

I think social hosting, a lot of parents think, "Oh, hosting a party, it's the safest thing to do." I think that's a cop out. And it also, the research is now clear, but no one wants to actually read it. You can post something about that. You can put it out there. They actually are like, "No, no, no, no, no. Look at me. I'm fine. I was drinking in high school. And kids are going to drink, so we got to just make it safe." But what they call safe, to me, I've talked to many young girls, in fact who have been sexually assaulted in a safe place because when a parent allows drinking in their house, kids actually drink more.

They also send the message that, "This is okay. We understand you have to drink because it's part of your developmental rite." And parents ignore this research about brain development and that the chances of

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addiction, exposure before 14. The statistics of your chances of being an addict and between the ages of 14 and 17. And the longer we can say no and have rules about this... We were very strict about it, we made it. And they're like, "You can't stop kids." You can make it really hard on kids, so they have to work really hard to make it happen.

Christin D'Ovidio:

I think that's another situation that I've heard from other parents as well who are talking about sex in that way, where, "It's going to happen anyways, so they might as well have it at my house."

Cindy Pierce:

Right.

Christin D'Ovidio:

How do you feel about that?

Cindy Pierce:

The kids who get comprehensive sexuality education early and often actually make healthier choices, they start later, they make more conscious choices, and that's what we're aiming for. We are hoping our kids will take their time and choose their partners carefully. And the answer to that is to educate them, to give them accurate information. And there's so many great resources. Knowing what I know about hookup culture, I would prefer that my kid was in a committed relationship. Communication, shared respect, really communicating. I'm not going to set up camp for them to have an easy time, but I would prefer my child in a committed relationship. It sounds counterintuitive. If we talk to kids about porn, they're going to watch more of it. If we talk to kids about sex, they're going to want to have it. It's actually not true. And pediatricians will tell you that, that that's actually not true. But parents will use that to justify why they don't talk to their kids about these things. One more thing-

Christin D'Ovidio:

And talk to them about substances, that they'll use them.

Cindy Pierce:

Yes.

Christin D'Ovidio:

It's actually not true.

Cindy Pierce:

Right. Not true. Substances, porn, all of it, social media. If I tell them all about this, that actually kids want to know what their parents think about drinking and alcohol. They do want to know what they think.

Christin D'Ovidio:

We ask all the guests what their definition of prevention is. So, may I ask that of you? What is your

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definition of prevention?

Cindy Pierce:

Education, honest conversation, even if it's awkward, err on more information because information is power. Kids who are informed will make healthier choices. So, we can prevent kids from using too early, having sex too early, being intimate in any way too early, of misusing social media, using porn to get miseducated if we talk to them first. So, early and often. And if we want our kids to have a healthy relationship with alcohol, social media, with a partner, sexual partner, if we really want our kids to grow up and be there, then we need to invest early and often. That's prevention. Investment with those early conversations, not one, but many over time.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Cindy's interest in this topic expanded to the point where she wrote two books where she explores more deeply the factors that influence young people's choices around sex, substance use, and healthy relationships. They are *Sexploitation: Helping Kids Develop Healthy Sexuality in a Porn-Driven World*, and *Sex, College, and Social Media: A Commonsense Guide to Navigating the Hookup Culture*.

Thank you, Cindy. It's been a pleasure. And also, we want to thank you, our listeners, for spending part of your day with us. If you're interested in learning more about what you can do to prevent substance misuse and reduce stigma, head on over to drugfreeh.org to explore our resources. While you're there, sign up for our notification so you don't miss our latest interviews, training opportunities, or other resources. Thank you.