



# Facts for the Teenage Life

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Sex is one of mankind's biggest preoccupations. The most jaundiced of us have to admit that teenagers - even in their worst moments - are a part of the human race and as fascinated by the thrill of the forbidden as the rest of us.

Since motivation is not a problem, what are the criteria to be used when assessing books about sex aimed at young people? How do publishers chart this minefield to ensure their product will sell?

Covers are of paramount importance. **But David - don't you know about the Facts of Life?** by Philip Boys and Corinne Pearlman screams 'inadequate!' at the hapless reader. Yet it's a somewhat different story between the covers. Cartoon strips imaginatively fictionalise a variety of subjects: most teenagers would identify with the situations discussed here. The potted biographies at the end of the book finally convince that condescension was no part of the publisher's plan.

The pseudo-medical textbook cover seems to be favoured by a small number of publishing houses. Less dismaying than **But David...., Sex - How? Why? What?** by Jane Goldman is simply coldly uninviting. Yet this guide for older teenagers is clearly written and extremely thorough in its coverage -everything from knowing your body to coping with unwanted pregnancy. This is detailed and helpful information about sex - including open answers to questions which many young people are afraid to ask.

Similarly informative, but with a much more appealing cover is **Straight Talk - How to Handle Sex** by Jane Butterworth. A blur of graphics with key words superimposed - understanding, independence, freedom - may sound contrived but has a sophisticated impact which makes it a more acceptable book to take from the shelves and up to the till.

Nick Fisher is a prolific writer of sex books for young people and his covers cannot be said to suffer from a surfeit of sophistication! **Living With A Willy - The Inside Story** has a bemused cartoon character nervously clutching copious boxer shorts, out of which a variety of technicolour rockets are exploding. This cheerful, chatty book may well offend strait-laced parents but it will find a wide audience among teenage boys because it speaks their language - not in that embarrassingly hearty tone which teachers adopt when they're trying to be 'matey' - but naturally interspersed between statements and questions by and from young people. Young boys will find what they need to know and frank advice is given about the need for sensitivity and the unacceptability of machismo. A worthy book, likely to be of service to both boys and girls.

Nick Fisher strikes again in **Boys about Boys**, a book stimulated by the correspondence he received in his role as

'Agony Uncle' for **Just 17** magazine. In the introduction Fisher explains that he wants the book to be 'a guide and a trigger for further discussion... and understanding'. It's certainly that - no-nonsense headings like 'Macho Activities and Behaviour', 'Myths and Realities' and 'Big Boys aren't emotional' demolish harmful stereotypes and replace them with role models which are put within the reach of any teenage boy. The tone throughout is matter-of-fact with the underlying assumption that this is how all thinking young adults behave.

As the cover suggests, girls too will benefit from reading this attractively priced book, since they're too often at the sharp end of incomprehensible and wounding male behaviour. After all, explanations promote understanding which, in turn, gives the confidence to deal with a potentially unpleasant situation.

Fisher scores once more with **Your Pocket Guide to Sex**. Anything bearing a flash stating 'The Book the Government Tried to Ban' with the terse quote "Smutty" from Brian Mawhinney, Minister for Health, on the back cover is bound to be a sure-fire winner with teenagers and young adults. It doesn't disappoint: it really is pocket-sized, it retails at £2.99 and it fulfills the promise of the blurb to guide young people through 'the complexities of sex' and help them see that 'good relations and emotions can count for a lot more than notches on the bed post'. Hurrah for common sense!

It would be perfectly possible for an antagonistic reader interested only in superficialities to latch onto the occasionally graphic teenage terminology but that would deny all the book's strengths. It provides an accessible source of sensible information about the sort of anxieties teenagers often succumb to and this is substantiated by the question and answer format familiar from teenage magazines. Celebrity quotes add further authority to a pleasing package. This is great value - counselling between soft covers.

Girls finally get their own book with **Girltalk** by Carol Weston, who describes it in her introduction as 'a personal encyclopaedia'. This is a fair description of the nine chapters which broadly cover all the topics at the front of teenage minds. Two chapters are devoted to sex and relationships and they consist of short, sharp wordbites of advice: immediately digestible but not wholly comprehensive. It's a browser's book, to return to as the need arises. **Girltalk** is attractively presented, with the tantalising rider 'All the Stuff Your Sister Never Told You' emblazoned across the front cover.

Anita Naik, like Nick Fisher, is a **Just 17** columnist and her book is liberally sprinkled with extracts from the hundreds of letters she receives each week. **Coping With Crushes** has a far narrower scope than any of the other books discussed in this article but it's mentioned here because it's an excellent offering: well-written, sympathetic and with constructive advice in the right measure. Naik never demeans - she quite properly points out that unrequited love is one of life's most painful and memorable experiences and that it's also a valuable learning process, preparation for the real thing when it finally comes along.

The understated black and white cover sets the tone for the narrative - there's no sensationalism, but a clear-headed exploration of an important issue, well-documented by the letter extracts which appear in every chapter. This is a valuable addition to the armoury of advice available to young people and well worth £4.99.

**Let's Talk about Sex** by Robie H Harris and illustrated by Michael Emberley is very much the star of the show. The cartoons are non-threatening: the disabled, homo- and bi-sexuals, and ethnic minority groups are all catered for in an entirely unaffected way. This unselfconscious approach, rippling with gentle humour, eases readers into what could have been potentially embarrassing situations.

The cartoon commentators, Bird and Bee, polarise attitudes to sex - the enthusiastic former leading the avowedly reluctant latter - providing young readers with a comforting off-stage voice. Their own attitudes will be represented here: more Bee than Bird, I suspect, but there's no hint of censure or criticism.

The best books about sex for young people deal with the subject in a forthright way, often employing the language and terminology which teenagers themselves use. Those which incorporate humour, usually in the form of cartoon strips, jokes or asides seem to deliver their message effectively and more palatably than sober texts which read too much like

medical handbooks.

Publishers should think hard about how sex books are packaged: a cover can sell a book or make its journey to the cashpoint a humiliating one. Teenagers are shy about buying books on this subject and the last thing they want is to be patronised or embarrassed. Price should be a consideration, too - most teenagers would balk at spending more than £5 on a book.

There seem to be far more books about sex for boys than for girls. It is rather dangerous to assume the existence of the stereotypical teenage girl, with a supportive mother, approachable sister and a group of female friends who will listen, advise and counsel. There's strong evidence that this network of emotional support is far more common amongst groups of girls than groups of boys, but many girls feel as isolated and confused as their male counterparts and should not be denied the help they need.

Those books which, gently but firmly, tackle deep-seated prejudices about sexual behaviour are the ones most welcome in the marketplace. Simply not dealing with issues like disability, homosexuality and mixed race partnerships can indicate to young people that these are subjects best avoided, that the individuals concerned are somehow odd, or inferior. A quiet acknowledgement of the whole range of sexual behaviours is more likely to educate wisely: avoiding difficult issues can indicate tacit disapproval.

Most important of all is the uniformly insistent message that asking for knowledge is the only way to overcome ignorance and the confusion it generates. Many young people are unhappy because they have no-one to ask about their fears and problems and this leaves them vulnerable to manipulation or exploitation. Young people need to be guided towards rewarding sexual relationships and this area of education has often been neglected or tackled badly. If adults cannot or will not approach this subject, there are now a variety of books which will at least open the door to discussion.

As Nick Fisher so succinctly puts it in **Boys about Boys** - 'if there's anything to want to know - it's all right to ask. In fact, it's not only all right to ask, it's important to ask.'

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#### **Book Details:**

**But David - dont you know About the Facts of Life?**, Penguin, 0 14 090330 5, £3.99

**Sex - How? Why? What? The Teenager's Guide**, Piccadilly, 1 85340 213 3, £6.99

**Straight Talk - How to Handle Sex**, Pan, 0 330 32462 4, £3.50

**Living with a Willy - The Inside Story**, Pan, 0 330 33248 1, £3.50

**Boys about Boys**, Pan, 0 330 32593 0, £3.50

**Your Pocket Guide to Sex**, Penguin, 0 14 024367 4, £2.99

**Girltalk**, Pan 0 330 32803 4, £5.99

**Coping with Crushes**, Sheldon Press, 0 85969 700 2, £4.99

**Let's Talk About Sex**, Walker, 0 7445 3252 3, £12.99

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