Inside People: Giving your kid a map for the sexual minefield

by Jane Clifford

At first I thought it was a joke. Jamie Lynn Spears, baby sister of Britney, is pregnant. Surely, this wasn't happening in a family already under siege. Surely, she'd learned something from watching Britney spiral out of control. Surely, she wouldn't purposely ruin her charmed life as the star of "Zoey 101" on Nickelodeon.

But it was true.

Word spread like wildfire after she talked exclusively to OK!, a celebrity magazine, and the cable channel issued a statement about the situation.

And that has left parents of her target audience, those 9- to 14-year-olds, somewhat frantic. The reaction seems to be, "Oh, great. Well, how do I tell my child about this?"

The backlash spread quickly, too. Moms and dads hit the Internet saying they would forbid their children to watch the show. Others demanded to know what kind of parent Lynn Spears is to have two such wayward daughters.

The sad truth is, Jamie Lynn Spears is not much different from about half the kids her age. The 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, an every-other-year report from the Centers for Disease Control that reflects health-risk behaviors among youth and young adults, noted that, during 2005, 46.8 percent of high school students reported having had sexual intercourse.

The difference between Jamie Lynn and her peers is one of two things: Some of those girls are protecting themselves from unwanted pregnancy, and the others are just plain lucky that they aren't pregnant, too.

That may be what scares parents most about this story. Especially those parents who are absolutely, positively sure their children aren't sexually active. More likely, some are absolutely, positively sure that they don't know - or don't want to know - if their children are sexually active.

And ignorance is bliss.

Why? Because we hate this part of parenting. We don't like talking about sex with our children. We don't

even like thinking about it.

"Join the club," as Planned Parenthood puts it on its Web site (plannedparenthood.org). "Most of us feel that way, and it's not surprising." Here's why:

- Many of us were taught that sex is too "dirty" to talk about.

- Many of us are afraid that we don't have all the answers.

- It's hard for some of us to admit our children are sexual.

- It's even hard for some of us to admit that we are sexual.

But this is a golden opportunity to start - or continue - this vitally important conversation with our children. Teenagers and Jamie Lynn's young fans. " 'Zoey 101' is an opportunity for sexuality education 101 and parenting 101 in some families," says Vince Hall, vice president for public affairs and communications at the San Diego Planned Parenthood office. "It really is a wake-up call for many people, that 16-year-olds get pregnant."

Hall says "the only 100 percent effective means of avoiding an unintended pregnancy is abstinence, but for young people who are sexually active, they have a responsibility to take precautions which will keep them in control of their own fertility and prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases."

And marriage and family therapist Catherine Butler says that's where we come in.

"We're willing to teach them to brush their teeth and wash their hands and be nice to people," she points out. "The next logical step is how to be safe with their bodies."

Mother of a 17-year-old son and 19-year-old daughter, Butler says, "Unfortunately, to assume that just because you're a churchgoing family" your children will follow all the rules is naive. "They value those rules, but they go out and do what they want to do, when they want to do it."

Butler tells us what we already know and fear.

"The reputation they have with their peers is almost more important" than following the rules sometimes.

"I think it's a matter of having discussions about sex like we do about money, jobs or grades," she says. "Build it into the family curriculum, start young, make it normal, weave it into the conversation.

If necessary, she says, ask for help.

"If you can't bring yourself to have these talks, bring in a trusted aunt or someone who can do it."

The Jamie Lynn situation is the perfect place to start with young children, to impress on them the importance of the decisions they make, Butler says. You can talk about the difference between Zoey, a wildly popular character, and the young actress who plays the role. It's a chance to show that even famous people make mistakes.

Children, depending on their age, need to be told the hardships that a teenage mother or father will face - the end of high school as they know it, not being able to hang out with their friends as much, having to save their money to buy diapers instead of something at the mall. Jamie Lynn won't have money problems, but her life is irrevocably changed.

So start talking, urges Butler: "Tell your daughter or son, 'We need to talk about this, you have a boyfriend/girlfriend now.' Refuse to take no for an answer. No matter how loudly they protest, they still listen."

She says, "They need this information, even if they say they don't. They live in a highly sexualized society, they're growing up online, growing up too fast."

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