

CHOICE/LESS 403: The Talk

- Jenn Stanley: This is the third episode in a five-part series, so if you're just joining us, please go back and listen from the beginning. Before we continue, we'd like to ask you to consider supporting our work. Rewire.News is a nonprofit. We rely on your donations to fund CHOICE/LESS and all of our evidence-based journalism. If you find this program valuable and you want to see more of it, please consider donating today. You can support us online at rewire.news/donation. That's rewire.news/donation. Thanks. Now, on with the show.
- Roni Washington: There has been an incident where she has done something that I did not totally agreed with. I cried, and I stepped away for two weeks, and I kind of hung up on her.
- Niky Washington: Mom, you can say it.
- Roni Washington: I'm not gonna bring it up, what it was.
- Jenn Stanley: Do you want to talk about it?
- Niky Washington: Yeah I don't mind. I'll talk about it.
- Roni Washington: It's up to you.
- Jenn Stanley: That's Roni Washington, and her 19-year-old daughter, Niky. They're from a Chicago suburb, and Niky just finished her freshman year at a liberal arts college about a few hours from the city.
- Roni and Niky both describe Roni as a cool mom. They talk about everything. Sometimes it's a little awkward.
- Roni Washington: When she learned how to put a condom on a banana, I had this look on my face.
- Jenn Stanley: And sometimes it doesn't always go so smoothly.
- Niky Washington: And winter I started dancing-
- Jenn Stanley: What do you mean by dancing?
- Niky Washington: Oh so, at a club. Like I basically strip. And so, she had found out through ... I think there was maybe some kids from my high school talking about it I guess, and she was really scared, and-
- Jenn Stanley: You found out not through your daughter.
- Niky Washington: Yeah, yeah. Exactly, so it was really ... She had a lot of emotions I think. And I think it was the part too that I kept it from her, too that had really bothered her.
- Jenn Stanley: For Rewire.news, I'm Jenn Stanley, and this is Season 4 of CHOICE/LESS.

Last time we talked about what happens when a teen wants to have an abortion, but doesn't want to involve a parent, but they live in a state where they're legally required to. Parental involvement laws can seem like a reasonable idea on the surface. What parent doesn't want to know when their child is going through something major in her life? But that shouldn't be the first time teens and their parents talk openly about sex.

The Guttmacher Institute reports that about half of American teens are sexually active, and that number has stayed pretty steady since the turn of the century. Most parents report talking to their kids about sex, and according to a 2013 Planned Parenthood study, about half of American teens report feeling really uncomfortable talking to their parents about these things.

In a 2010 large-scale study, a majority of American parents reported that their children were not sexually active. However, when the children themselves were asked, they reported otherwise. So, even if the conversations are happening, they're likely not coming from the most open, honest place.

Several barriers can get in the way of teens and parents having a healthy discussion about sex. Parents might not have enough information themselves-

("Molly Grows Up" 1953)

Speaker 4: No, it's not a good idea the first two or three days of your period. You might get chills and catch cold.

Jenn Stanley: Religion could dictate what information is and is not shared-

(Billy Graham: Sex, Marriage, and Materialism)

Billy Graham: An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall be no sign given it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah.

Jenn Stanley: Or their parents could feel shame surrounding sexual issues for any number of reasons, and in turn, pass that shame down to their children.

(Gilmore Girls Season 6)

Mrs. Kim: You're expected to have it-

Lane Kim: Mama, please-

Mrs. Kim: -you're going to have to do it with this boy. You're just going to have to do it. Hopefully if you're lucky like me you'll only have to do it once.

Jenn Stanley: These discussions are complicated even in the best of circumstances, which brings me back to Roni Washington and Niky. Roni has three children, including Niky, who's in the middle.

Roni Washington: I raised my kids to be critical thinkers. I raised them to be free spirit. Along with that comes all those things that I have to actually challenge myself, even if I am uncomfortable. In my culture, we don't talk about sex. Sex education was very minimal for me.

Here's my sex talk. You can get pregnant in one minute. That was it.

Jenn Stanley: Roni had her first daughter when she was 18 years old, and she says it was hard. In fact, she credits it with making her pro-choice.

Roni Washington: Back when I was younger, I didn't believe in abortion. But as I got older, I believe in abortion.

Jenn Stanley: What changed?

Roni Washington: I actually had a baby young, and I realized how hard it was. It was not easy, and I don't know why I didn't believe in abortion. If you asked me when I was 18, why I didn't believe in abortion I don't know. I grew up in a very Bible Belt state, and then after going through the hardships that I had to go through, I understand that not everybody can do this, and everybody has their own decisions. So I actually became more pro-choice.

Jenn Stanley: It took Roni's own parents a while before they were supportive of her life choices, and she didn't want to raise her children that way. In her home, it would be open communication, trust, and support. But there isn't a perfect roadmap for good communication, and sometimes you just have to try, and struggle, and keep trying.

Roni Washington: Essentially when you sit there as a parent, you tell your kids that there's open communication. Your kids are gonna test you and tell you things you really don't want to know, and you really ... there's too much information. However, to foster that open communication, you have to bite the bullet, not judge. Probably look the other way at times so that your facial expression, they can't see it. And then just listen.

And then, the good thing is that, they did ask for my opinions. And maybe they didn't like it, and maybe they didn't take it at the time, but it was always a foundation. And at the end it's always me telling them, "It's your choice. Know your cause and effect." So, that's how I foster that open communication.

Jenn Stanley: And that was part of Roni's struggle when she found out that Niky was dancing at a strip club. Yes, she was upset that Niky didn't tell her and she had to find out from another parent. But it was more than that. She was worried about her. She was worried about her future, and she doesn't agree with it.

Roni Washington: It's still a process. I'm not gonna lie. Basically, I found out through another parent, and I was in my car actually getting ready to drive down here, by the way, at 10:00 at night. And I turned back around when I was able to reach her. And, yes, I probably yelled at her. I didn't probably ... I yelled at her. And the

first thing that came through my mind was safety. That's the first thing, is safety. Oh my gosh.

Second was, are you gonna forget your education? What if people find out? This and that. What if it comes back to hit you? And I talked to her about that. I said, "Look. I'm not here 24/7. This is not something I wish you would do." I don't think I talked to you for a couple weeks. I think I had to process it. I went through this whole thing in my head, like, "What did I do wrong? Where did I go wrong?" Blah blah blah. I did all that, as a parent.

Then after two weeks, maybe a few weeks, I came to visit her just to see, personally, in her face, where her head was at. I needed to know, was she still focused? And she was. I still prefer her not to do it, but we talk openly about it.

Jenn Stanley: I bring up this story because sex work is one of those very taboo subjects for some people, like abortion. And Niky struggled to talk to her mom about it. Her mom, who's the cool mom, her mom who all of her friends go to with their own problems.

Roni Washington: Both my girls did that throughout high school, with their friends. They've had some friends who were in positions, and they would come to me. I love helping kids, and I love helping kids that don't get the support that they need, because I come from that. So to be honest with you, at times, I could probably engage with them better than I can engage with my own kids, who have the support. I find it rewarding. I find it fun to watch them grow.

Jenn Stanley: So, why couldn't Niky tell Roni about the dancing? She says she's not ashamed of it. She thinks it's fun. She feels safe at the club where she dances, and she likes the money. She generally is open about it with other people, she's excelling in school, so why? Why couldn't she talk to her mom about it?

Niky Washington: It was like, as I grow up, okay, should I talk to her about partying? And then at a certain point I'd talk to her about partying. Should I talk to her about this? Okay at a certain point I talked to her about this. So I think again, this was maybe another, what she would call maybe test, where I didn't know exactly ... Hmm, do I want to tell her, and how would I tell her?

Jenn Stanley: So, for Niky, she didn't see it as keeping a secret from her mom. It was information that she knew she was going to disclose eventually, but not until she was ready. Of course, that's not how it went. Never seems like it goes that way. And the two of them were forced into the discussion when another parent from their town told Roni.

Niky Washington: So, when she called me ... Well first she was like, "Where are you?" And I was like, "I'm in the car." I wasn't really specific. I was in an Uber back home, and she's like, "Niky are you dancing?" And I was like, I said ... And she's like, "Niky are you dancing?" I was like, "Yeah. I am." Even though I knew she'd be upset, I could never really imagine her dropping me from this out of all things. And it's because too I think she knows me as a person, that I'm not ... I think it's

something that she could have ... Things are going through my mind that she could have possibly be worried about is that, oh I don't like school anymore and that I'm dropping it. But then again, I knew that she knew that I liked school. She knew that I loved, what I was passionate about school and that I was passionate about my organizations. So, I feel like at the end of the day, even though she was angry, I knew that right now it was emotions and that later that we'd be able to talk through it.

Jenn Stanley: As Roni mentioned earlier, that call ended up with her hanging up the phone on her daughter. But Niky trusted that she'd come around in her own time. So, she decided to send her mom a video, just explaining what was going on in her life.

Niky Washington: I sent her a video saying that it's because of the way that she has raised me and for me to unlearn all these stigmas, and because I'm not ashamed of what people would consider when they think about, oh girls who strip, or girls who do sex work and stuff like that, that oh my god, this is something super terrible and stuff. And I talked to her about how I've been constantly unlearning these notions that we've been taught by society which makes girls not pure and everything like that. And I said, "I honestly thank you for that, and this isn't a bad reflection on your parenting. If anything, you've raised a really confident, strong daughter who I feel like knows herself."

Jenn Stanley: This wasn't the first time Niky had the parents in their town talking. You see, Niky's been trying to chip away at sex shame and stigma since high school, and some of the other parents and students didn't like that.

Niky Washington: Since high school, I think that the people who don't know me well have been like, "Oh, she's a thot." And if anyone doesn't know what that means, it's like a now term for slut and stuff, or she gets around, or she's the type that's not ... She's a hit-it-and-quit-it type. She doesn't go in relationships and stuff like that. And I think it's really sad actually that being open about sex and your body is all of a sudden linked to this stigma, first off, that I don't even like ... That is talked about about women. And I find that super crazy and super interesting. And I think it drives my friends crazy more than it drives me crazy, because they're like, "I know Niky. I love Niky. You have to get to know her. And she's made me the kind of person I am today." But it's a reciprocal thing. My friends having my back and supporting me, has made me really confident as well. So-

Jenn Stanley: And it wasn't just her friends. Roni also supported her, raised her to stand up for what she believed in, and this was something she believed in. Niky saw the shame and stigma around sexuality, particularly women's sexuality, as a problem that she needed to speak up against.

Niky Washington: There's a lot of teenagers themselves sometimes, who think and who believe in the terms of these stigmas, that oh, sexuality is a weird thing to talk about. And I think right now, what would be a good start, is just having these conversations, having these dialogues. Because before we can even try and advocate, people have to see that there is a problem.

Jenn Stanley: Roni says she raised Niky to be an activist, so it was no surprise to her when Niky said she wanted to get involved with the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, better known as ICAH. ICAH's mission is to train and work with young people to advocate for policies and practices that promote a positive approach to adolescent health and parenting.

Roni Washington: I wanted her to get involved. I wanted her to be an activist, so I knew that she'll go in it, she'll come back and tell me, and then we'll go from there. Which we did. So, no I did not know everything about it. So I was new. But like I said, there were some interesting moments where I was like, "Oh, okay."

Jenn Stanley: Interesting moments like when Niky passed out condoms in the school cafeteria, or organized to repeal Illinois' parental notification of abortion law, which we discussed in the last episode. You see, one of ICAH's largest focus areas at the moment is a repeal of that law. They say it doesn't serve teens and parents because you can't mandate good communication. Here's ICAH's executive director, Tiffany Pryor, discussing that work.

Tiffany Pryor: We've been working on parental notice for years. It's really ramped up in the past couple of years. We know that abortion restrictions continue to happen every single year. It's something that just has not gone away. There's a lot of hostility around abortion access in general. For ICAH, we recognize that mainstream movements are doing a lot of abortion access work, but we know that young people are still directly impacted by abortion restrictions. And so, parental notice is one of those. And so if we're gonna have a conversation around abortion access and not include young people, then we're not actually having a comprehensive conversation about it.

Jenn Stanley: But, as we discussed in the last episode, this can be a hard sell to parents who want to be involved in their children's major life decisions. And, Niky's work in support of a repeal was at first another one of those moments that made Roni take pause.

Roni Washington: For me as a parent, I was conflicted because I want to know. Why wouldn't I want to know? But then I had to stop, step back, and think, not everybody has that support. I'm okay with it, but yeah, I would say I was conflicted. Because as a parent, I'll be honest. I want to know. I want to know what is happening to my kid. But I'm coming from the supportive side. But if that kid doesn't feel supported, then I totally understand why they wouldn't want to notify a parent.

Jenn Stanley: As we heard in the last episode, a lot of parents feel the way that Roni did. When they first hear about the law, they think, "Yes, of course I'd want to know if my kid were having an abortion." And the anti-abortion advocates in favor of the law know this, and they promote it that way, as a no-brainer. What parent wouldn't want to know if their child was having an abortion?

Here's Paul Linton. He's an attorney for the Thomas More Society, a conservative religious law firm. Paul created the legal strategy that ultimately led to the Illinois parental notification law being put into effect.

Paul Linton: I think minors often react in ways that are not justified by actual circumstances. They may think ... I'm sure it's very often the case that minors who get pregnant think that their parents are just gonna go berserk over it, and kick them out of the house, or whatever. And the reality could be, anyway, that well they're disappointed or whatever, but they're gonna be supportive. And I think, and this often happens I think with minors, not just girls but boys involving all types of behavior, they do something that they know their parents don't approve of or wouldn't approve of, and the results are not as drastic or as dramatic or as adverse as they were expecting.

Jenn Stanley: But, this is kind of idealistic. It assumes that all parents are supportive. It assumes that all parents have their kids' best interest at heart.

Research shows that even without parental involvement laws, most teens do involve a parent in their abortion decisions, and the ones that don't, usually have a good reason. Here's Tiffany again.

Tiffany Pryor: If we think about young people who are experiencing harm at home, there's a reason why they're not wanting to involve the folks in their house around this decision-making process. We know that there are folks who get kicked out of their houses when someone finds out that they are pregnant. And any time someone is put in harm's way, that's part of why we say we can't have this blanket law, that says that all young people, their parents need to be notified. Because that's not the situation that everyone's experiencing.

I do also want to say that we know that a majority of young people will involve someone in that process. So the research does tell us that youth who feel comfortable will have the conversation, and so we just go back and say, "And what about the youth who don't?" And that's why having laws like this just, we say, shouldn't exist. Because we're leaving out the people who that communication hasn't happened for them, and we have to trust and ... Not we have to. We trust and believe that there's a reason that they're not involving this person.

I also wish, too, we would get out of this idea that parents are the ones who young people also always go to all the time. There are many adults in our lives that we have figured out when we were younger, that young people are figuring out now, who their accomplices are in this world. Who is that person that you're going to, to have conversations that you're not having with your parent? And there's no room for that here. It just says it's your parent, your guardian, someone who, adult family member who's living at home, when there are other people that youth have identified are those safe people for them, that they can talk to about this decision. So it just restricts folks, and it mandates who we can and cannot have conversations with, when I think it all can exist.

Jenn Stanley: This made me think of Jane from episode one, who felt like she couldn't tell her parents about her abortion at 15, even though she knew they were pro-choice, and knew they wouldn't force her to do something she didn't want to do. But

they also never talked to her about sex, and she didn't feel comfortable having this conversation with them. But she still had support. She told a trusted teacher, her friends, her sister. And she says they all helped her get through it when she wasn't ready to tell her parents.

Jane: That group of girls that I particularly hung out with, all of them knew, and were quite supportive of me. No one judged me, and a lot of them were very staunch Catholics as well. I was just surprised at how, although it seemed really close-minded, throughout our teachers and what they were preaching, that the kids individually knew me, and knew that I wasn't some horrible person, or just out to kill babies. Thank god. And that, plus my sister's support, was pretty good for me to at least have some people to vent to.

Jenn Stanley: Did you tell your parents?

Jane: Not until way later in life.

Jenn Stanley: How old were you when you told your parents?

Jane: 22.

Jenn Stanley: Wow.

Jane: Yeah, I waited a long time.

Jenn Stanley: What was that conversation like?

Jane: Well actually I had gotten pregnant again, and was going through the same thing, and I was yet again not ready or prepared. And this time it wasn't no birth control, it was a genuine mess-up kind of thing. And I had debated at that point, of maybe keeping it. And then after discussing it with my parents, and telling them all that stuff, they were like, "You could, or you could finish college." You know? At least get a career first, before ... They're like, "You'll have plenty of time to have a kid." So, it was nice to at least be able to have their support, at that point. But having to go through that again, it's just shameful. You feel shameful. You're like, "I already made this mistake once."

Jenn Stanley: But she says the experience overall was better. She could use insurance to pay for it. She had more support. She could go to a nearby clinic that offered general anesthesia, and because she talked to her family about it, her mom shared something that put Jane's whole experience into perspective, and made her feel less alone.

Jane: Even though they were supportive, you don't want things to happen to your child. You don't want your kid to have to go through that. So it was definitely hard for my mom. But then she opened up to me about having an abortion herself, when she was 19 years old. And it wasn't legal at all in Massachusetts, so her mother actually took her to New York City, to have it done. And it was

this day-long trip, and they never really talked about it after, but she had the support of her mom, and she was like, "I wish you had just come to me."

So at least it was a little bit easier for me. I didn't have to go to New York City. I could just go to New Hampshire.

Jenn Stanley: What was it like when your mom told you about her pre-Roe abortion?

Jane: I was just amazed. Because my grandmother was raised Baptist, and that's a very strict form of Protestantism. My mom couldn't even play cards on Sundays, because that was completely devoted to God. So the fact that her mom would take her, was like, wow. That's unbelievable to me, how progressive her parents were. So I think I was more, one, surprised at the fact that my grandmother would have taken my mom to do that at all, but also, wow, you had to go to New York City, and they didn't have them here? That's crazy. I had to go to New Hampshire only because I didn't ask them.

Jenn Stanley: Tiffany Pryor from ICAH says experiences like Jane's aren't uncommon, that if and when a person does feel ready to share their abortion story with their parents, they're often met with support. Opening up about difficult circumstances with supportive people can be healing. But does that mean it should be forced? And can forced communication ever be healing?

When ICAH identified parental notification of abortion as a crucial issue to focus their efforts on, they began collecting stories of young people in Illinois who had had abortions. Aaryanna Garris is one of them. She said she wanted to tell her story, because she could, and she was ready. But it had taken her years to tell her mother about it.

She was 19 when she had an abortion, so she wasn't forced to tell a parent. And her own mother had her when she was a teenager, so Aaryanna was afraid to tell her mother that she had chosen a different path.

Aaryanna Garris: I did not tell my mother until years later. It was something that really weighed on me actually, having not done that. It took me a while to realize that, years of emotional processing, to realize that I had been disappointed in myself that my mother, I felt like, had made such a great sacrifice at such a young age, and I owed my existence to that. And I realized not going to her in the moment that I had made that choice was really probably because I felt a lot of shame about not thinking that I was strong enough to do the same thing that she did.

Of course, she, as soon as I told her what happened, she was like, "Wow, okay. You made the right choice you needed to make for you and I'm happy that you could recognize that. I made the choice I wanted to make for me, but I had already always known that I wanted to be a mother when I found out that I was pregnant. And that's not the path that your life has taken, and so I'm glad that you didn't put yourself in a situation where you would now be a parent, because of feeling like you needed to do what I did, follow my path."

Jenn Stanley: The people who are most vulnerable to the law aren't Aaryanna or Jane. Not everyone has a supportive home. Not everyone has parents. Some pregnant teens seeking abortions already have children. Some have been impregnated by family members. These are people who, no matter what the law dictates, they might never be able to have healthy conversations with their families about anything, let alone about their abortions.

I'd like to pose another question, and one that we'll get into more in the next episode. But if parents were really doing such a good job talking to their kids about sex, why would they need a law to force their kids to tell them about their abortions?

We covered a lot of the tough sex talks today, but in the next episode, we're going to look at how we're doing with some of the more basic sex stuff. More specifically, how are parents and schools doing when it comes to sex ed?

Sally Wagenmaker: I think I had heard from other parents that some of them opted out, some of them thought it was really weird to have a teacher who would advocate so strongly of promiscuity and the use of pornography.

Jenn Stanley: Next time, on CHOICE/LESS.

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