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Dr. Ruth's Guide to Teens and Sex Today: From Social Networking to Friends with Benefits

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"Were you surprised that MySpace had to remove 29,000 sex offenders from its lists?" the authors ask? Dr. Ruth, who turns eighty this year, has kept abreast of the Internet age, its benefits and dangers. This book, her thirty-second, combines messages of concern with reassurance. She is characteristically good-humoured, blunt, and sensitive, respecting privacy of parents and teens while guiding the former in asking and telling what is appropriate.

Westheimer offers three basic rules: "don't panic, maintain control, and become an expert."

Learn to use a computer if you do not know how already. Bolster your information with a good book (e.g. her own *Sex for Dummies*) and good web sites (sexetc.org and teenpregnancy.org are among those in the appendix). Successful parents transfer control to their young but gradually: Dr. Ruth wisely prefers excess caution to excess freedom. Control yielded to kids is hard to get back. Some examples seem peripheral to sex, but they are used well. For example, cell phones and driving don't mix—especially text messaging: she would take away both phone and driving privileges for a teen who crosses that line.

Dr. Ruth sets limits in a kindly but no-nonsense way. Her conversational style makes heavier material surprisingly approachable, helping the reader to engage with teens. The chapters on social networking via computer and on Internet pornography are clear and essential. The appendix reproduces a contract from MySpace on safe Internet practices. Dr. Ruth is traditional in urging gradual increase of intimacy. She accepts masturbation as normal, and approves of premarital sex if reliable contraception is used and love is mutual. Sexual contortions displayed on porn sites are people acting for pay, not having fun. She cautions about the danger of anal sex, but is accepting of gay relationships. Westheimer has concerns about "friends with benefits," i.e., sexual favors done presumably without strong feelings, therefore with minimal emotional risk. "I'm particularly afraid that this person will be a young girl being taken advantage of by a boy, particularly if she has any self-esteem issues."

A pioneer and prophet in sex education, Dr. Ruth Westheimer offers an antidote to sexualized media in general and Internet porn in particular. Her prescription is sex only with the partner you know and love best, with heart and soul, and when you are fully informed and prepared. This book will help parents, teachers, clergy, and counselors guide teens through the maze of "abstinence only" vs. "Do it" messages. (September 2008)
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