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## SEX-TOY PARTIES BACK IN LIVING ROOMS

By Libby Copeland  
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WASHINGTON - If you hosted a sex-toy party in your home, you probably wouldn't invite your mother.

But not only did Dawn Montgomery invite her mom, whom she lives with and who cleaned their house in Accokeek, MD, for the party, but she also asked three aunts, a cousin and a slew of friends and co-workers.

Later, while guests milled about, Dawn, 31, filed through the rack of lingerie and pulled out a blue teddy and a purple one. "Okay, Mom, which one do you like for me?"

"Well, the blue is nice," said Jacqueline Medley, 50, relaxing on the couch as her daughter held one nightie, then the other, in front of her. "Well, maybe that would be more for me."

Dawn, a customer service rep at the Department of Motor Vehicles, is today's sexually liberated woman. Skip the '90's; this is the Aught Age. She's not some free lovin' hippie throwback. Her brand of sexual awareness is post-post feminist, the marketing-age sexuality of "romance enhancements" and "relationship aids", of lotions and potions, of scented candles and vibrators and flimsy filigreed garments like the one she finally winds up buying in blue.

In other words, she is the perfect hostess for a sex toy party - the phenomenon born in the early '70's that has swelled surprisingly in popularity and profits.

Inspired by the Tupperware party and the Avon lady, sex-toy party companies hit pay dirt in the late '80's and early '90's, and now if you throw a dart at any of the Lower 48, chances are that if you don't find one of these companies' headquarters you'll at least come upon a few distributors.

"We're in the middle of the Bible Belt!" says Surprise Parties co-owner Sue Rhea, whose operations, based in Mount Juliet, Tenn., has grown from one distributor (herself) in 1989 to more than 400 today in 25 states and Canada. "If we can do this here, we can do it anywhere."

Here's the deal on the sex-toy party: A smartly dressed woman arrives at your house with duffel bags and Rubbermaid containers filled with all manner of hardware, then proceeds to give a three- to- four hour tour of the products to you and 20 of your closet female friends. There is occasional shrieking and continual laughter. No

one takes their clothes off. The demonstration itself resembles a cross between a bachelorette party and an archaeological dig, which is to say you spend half the time wondering what is that?

"I don't like to go to Tupperware parties," says Mary Hill, 46, "But this - I think this had my name written all over it."

Hang out with these women for an afternoon and you'll come away with a conclusion you might have reached once in your intellect but not in your gut: Sex is no big deal. All the nervous tittering and closemouthedness is a lot of wasted energy.

If the '80's were a time of economic prosperity layered with social conservatism, the '90's - Internet porn sites, unwanted sex email and all - were a time of sexual deluge, with the release of the Starr Report onto office screens everywhere as its high water mark.

"After all", says cultural sexologist Carol Queen in San Francisco, "in the '80's everyone was worrying about herpes and AIDS, and discussions of sex took on a troubled tone - they weren't about sexual experimentation anymore, but sexual defense. By the '90's there had been so much "hysteria," Queen says that "the same cultural conditions that made it a little less safe to explore sex" a decade before "were also the genesis for the atmosphere that made it more easy."

The event, when it finally happens, is a downright banquet. There's white zinfandel, champagne, pina colada, fruit platters and fried chicken. There's chocolate-covered cake that would be X-rated if anyone could figure out precisely what body part it's supposed to look like.

Representatives stress the "educational" aspect of her shows. Representatives also make the point that women aren't eager to go into adult bookstores. The all-female parties seem safer.

No trade organizations seem to exist to offer hard statistics on the trajectory of sex-toy parties. But their growth, both in terms of the number of companies around and in terms of the expansions of these companies, seems undeniable.

These women buy lotions and glitter and something called the "Pirate's Cove." Many are candid about their purchases, talking about them or opening their plain stapled paper bags to let a curious reporter peek inside. There's an easy frankness about the plug-in pleasure, pleasure at different speeds, pleasure in a book and on a string - all of which, after a while, begins to seem downright conventional.