

talking with your teen about sex



Children are exposed to sexual messages every day—on TV, on the Internet, in movies, in magazines, and in music. Sex in the media is so common that you might think that teens today already know all they need to about sex. They may even claim to know it all, so sex is something you just don't talk about. Unfortunately, only a small amount of what is seen in the media shows responsible sexual behavior or gives correct information.

Your teen needs a reliable, honest source to turn to for answers—the best source is you. You may feel uneasy talking with your teen about sex, but your guidance is important. Beyond the basic facts about sex, your teen needs to hear from you about your family values and beliefs. This needs to be an ongoing discussion and not just one “big talk.” This publication was written by the American Academy of Pediatrics to help you talk with your teen about this important and sensitive subject.

Why should I talk to my teen about sex?

When it comes to something as important as sex and sexuality, nothing can replace your influence. You are the best person to teach your teen about relationships, love, commitment, and respect in what you say and by your own example.

Talking about sex should begin when your children first asks questions like, “Where do babies come from?” If you wait until your children are teens to talk about sex, they will probably learn their first lessons about sex from other sources. Studies show that children who learn about sex from friends or through a program at school instead of their parents are more likely to have sex before marriage. Teens who talk with their parents about sex are sexually active at a later age than those who don't.

What should I tell my teen about sex?

Communication between parents and teens is very important. Your teen may not share the same values as you but that shouldn't stop you from talking about sex and sexuality.

Before your children reach their early teens, girls and boys should know about the following:

- Correct body names and functions of male and female sex organs
- Puberty and how the body changes (When and how the body changes is different for each child.)
- Menstruation (periods)
- Sexual intercourse and the risk of getting pregnant or getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI), including HIV (the virus that causes AIDS)
- Your family values about dating, sexual activity, cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs

During the teen years, your talks about sex should focus more on the social and emotional aspects of sex, and your values. Be ready to answer questions like

- When can I start dating?
- When is it OK to kiss a boy (or a girl)?
- How far is too far?
- How will I know when I'm ready to have sex?
- Won't having sex help me keep my boyfriend (or girlfriend)?
- Do you think I should have sex before marriage?
- Is oral sex really sex?
- How do I say “No”?
- What do I do if someone tries to force me to have sex?

Answer your teen's questions based on your values—even if you think your values are old-fashioned. If you feel strongly that sex before marriage is wrong, share this with your teen and explain why you feel that way. If you explain the reasons for your beliefs, your teen is more likely to understand and adopt your values.

Other concerns include the following:

- **Peer pressure.** Teens face a lot of peer pressure to have sex. If they aren't ready to have sex, they may feel left out. But more than 50% of teens wait until after high school to have sex, and there are benefits of waiting. Abstinence from sex (oral, vaginal, and anal) provides 100% protection against STIs and pregnancy, and less emotional stress if there's a breakup.
- **STIs.** Teens need to know that having sex exposes them to the risk of STIs. Common STIs include chlamydia, gonorrhea, human papillomavirus (HPV), herpes, HIV, and trichomoniasis. HPV is responsible for most cervical cancer.
- **Prevention.** The only sure way to prevent STIs is *not* to have sex.
- **Reducing the risk.** Condoms (male or female) are the safest method to reduce the risk of most STIs and should always be used. Also, postponing sex until later teen years or adulthood reduces the risk. If both partners are abstinent before marriage or in a long-term, mature relationship; have never had an STI; and have sex with each other only (monogamy), the risk is eliminated.
- **Monogamy.** Many teens have heard that monogamy is “safe sex”; however, they misunderstand and believe that having one partner and then switching and having another partner and then switching is monogamy. While having multiple partners during the same time frame is especially risky for STI exposure, having one partner after another is not monogamy (monogamy means one partner for life).
- **Birth control.** Girls *and* boys need to know about birth control whether they decide to have sex or not. If your teen doesn't know about birth control, an unplanned pregnancy might result. Ten percent of teen girls in the United States get pregnant each year. By the age of 20 years, 4 out of 10 girls become pregnant. Birth control pills, shots (trade name Depo-Provera),

and contraceptive patches only prevent pregnancy—they don't protect against STIs, including HIV/AIDS. Condoms and another reliable birth control method need to be used each time to help reduce the risk of STIs and pregnancy.

- **Date rape.** Date (or acquaintance) rape is a serious problem for teens. It happens when a person your teen knows (for example, a date, friend, or neighbor) forces her (or him) to have sex. Make sure your teen understands that “no always means no.” Also, dating in groups instead of alone and avoiding drugs and alcohol reduces the risk of date rape.
- **Sexuality.** This is a difficult topic for many parents, but your teen probably has many questions about heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality. Many young people go through a stage when they wonder, “Am I gay?” It often happens when a teen is attracted to a friend of the same gender, or has a crush on a teacher of the same gender. This is common and doesn't necessarily mean your teen is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Sexual identity may not be firmly set until adulthood. If your teen is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, your love and acceptance is important.
- **Masturbation.** Masturbation is a topic few people feel comfortable talking about. It's a normal and healthy part of human sexuality and shouldn't be discouraged. Discuss this in terms of your values. Talk with your pediatrician if your child can't limit masturbation to a private place (for example, bedroom or bathroom).

How do I talk with my teen?

Sex is a very personal and private matter. Many parents find it difficult to talk with their children about sex. Teens may be too embarrassed, not trust their parents' advice, or prefer not to talk with their parents about it. But sex is an important topic to talk about.

The following tips may help make talking with your teen easier:

- **Be prepared.** Read about the subject so your own questions are answered before talking with your teen. Practice what you plan to say with your spouse or partner, a friend, or another parent. This may make it easier to talk with your teen when the time comes. Speak calmly and clearly.

Won't talking about sex with my children make them want to try it?

Parents often fear that if they talk about sex, their children may want to try it. Teens are curious about sex, whether you talk to them about it or not. Studies show that teens whose parents talk openly about sex are actually *more* responsible in their sexual behavior.

Your guidance is important. It will help your teen make better-informed decisions about sex. Teens who don't have the facts about sex and look to friends and the media for answers are the most likely to get into trouble (such as getting STIs or becoming pregnant).

Sex and the media

Media entertain, educate, and inform. But some messages may not be what we want children to learn.

American media today often portray sexual images and suggestive sexual content. In fact, the average young viewer is exposed to more than 14,000 sexual references each year. Only a small amount of what is seen in the media shows responsible sexual behavior or gives correct information about abstinence (not having sex), birth control, or the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Media in any format can have a positive or negative effect on your teen. This makes it important for you to know what your teen is listening to or watching. Many lyrics can be obtained online in case you need help figuring out the words. Watch TV or go to the movies with your teen—it can be a great starting point for your next talk about sex.

Pay attention to TV and movie ratings. Movies with an R (restricted) rating contain material that is not appropriate for children younger than 17 years. PG-13 movies may contain violence, graphic language, or adult situations.

- **Be honest.** Let your teen know that talking about sex isn't easy for you but that you think it's important that information about sex comes from you. And even though you would prefer that your values be accepted, ultimately decisions about sex are up to your teen. If your teen disagrees with you or gets angry, take heart, you have been heard. These talks will help your teen develop a solid value system, even if it's different from your own.
- **Listen.** Give your teen a chance to talk and ask questions. It's important that you give your full attention.
- **Try to strike a balance.** While teens need privacy, they also need information and guidance from parents. If your teen doesn't want to talk with you about sex and tells you that it's none of your business, be firm and say that it is your business. Your teen should know that you're asking out of love and concern, especially because there are potentially harmful situations. If your teen is quiet when you try to talk about sex, say what you have to say anyway. Your message may get through.
- **Ask for help.** If you just can't talk to your teen about sex, ask your pediatrician, a trusted aunt or uncle, or a minister, priest, or rabbi for help. Also, many parents find it useful to give their teens a book on human sexuality and say, “Take a look at this, and let's talk.”

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