

PARENT SERIES

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Adolescent Sexuality and Sexual Health

Sex Education with Your Teenager

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Adolescence is a transition period between childhood and adulthood involving significant physical, mental, emotional, social and self-concept changes. There is much individual variation in the growth spurt, but it usually occurs around ages 9-10 for girls and 10-12 in boys. Adolescents grow taller, become heavier, and begin to take on adult appearances. During sexual maturation, secondary sexual characteristics appear, such as breast development, genital development, widening of the hips, appearance of pubic and body hair, and changes in voice.

The onset of the menstrual period in females is usually 2-3 years after breast development. During puberty, higher and more variable sex hormones are present, which increases sexual interest. Adolescent relationships become more emotionally and sexually intimate. As the teen sexually matures, the perceived benefits of engaging in sexual activities increase, and the perceived costs decrease.

That means it's important for parents to provide accurate information about sexuality and sexual issues as well as to share their attitudes and values. There is no evidence that providing teens with complete and accurate information increases their engagement in sexual activity.

Importance of Sex Education for Adolescents

Sex education in its broadest sense involves the teaching of attitudes, values and feelings about human sexuality; it is about relationships and respect for oneself and others. Parents are the primary sex educators for their children. Indeed, most teenagers view their parents as influential in determining their attitudes and values about sexuality, and prefer to get information about sex from their parents.

When parents do not provide their teens with accurate information, they usually get it from other sources, such as siblings, peers, and public media including television, magazines, movies and advertising.

Unfortunately, this information is likely to be inaccurate, confusing, and may even be damaging to teen self-perception. Sex education can help put the constant media exposure to sexuality in proper perspective; assist teens in making sense out of these confusing messages; and increase the chances that they will behave responsibly with regard to their own sexuality.

Most commonly, parents talk with their children about sexual anatomy, puberty, pregnancy and the birth process, but do not discuss sexual intercourse, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), birth control, sexual abuse or sexual identity — the very topics about which adolescents need information. Lack of adequate sex education is seen as a primary cause for teenage pregnancy and teenagers contracting STDs. Moreover, with increasing reports of child sexual abuse and adolescent sexual assault, adolescents must also be taught skills that enable them to make good decisions in the sexual arena and to recognize and avoid dangerous and/or exploitive situations.

Tips for Sexual Education with Teenagers

Teenagers need information on safe sex, body image, sexual identity and relationships. Giving complete and accurate information can challenge even the most informed parent. Buying or borrowing a resource book for yourself and your adolescent is an excellent practice. Books provide platforms for discussion of sensitive topics, and let you revisit certain topics throughout this developmental period. Several such books are listed in the “Resources” section at the end of this handout.

Depending on you and your teen’s level of comfort, you can look at these resources together; let your teen read them on his or her own; or simply leave the books in an accessible place in your home.

When we talk about sexuality we are not just talking about what we DO as sexual beings but also who we ARE. Sexuality is expressed in our relationships with each other, how we view ourselves and how we are able to express friendship, love and pleasure. Every person’s self-image is inseparably tied to their sex and sexual identity. Tell your teen that sexual identity is an important part of who he or she is, meaning that it is not something to be hidden or lied about.

When we talk about sexuality, we are talking about ONE aspect of ourselves. It is important to remember that sexuality is part of us, but does not define who we are. Sexuality is an important part of your teen’s identity. However, just like being tall, having brown hair, or a good singing voice, sexuality is just one aspect of who your teen is. No one aspect defines us. This can be an especially important message for LGBTQ youth.

Giving factual information about sexual health and safety to your teenager is important and can still be done according to your value system. Knowing facts about STDs, prevention of pregnancy, sexual orientation, gender identity, and prevention of sexual assault will help keep teens healthier and safer. Before speaking with your child about sexuality, think about what your values are. What do you believe? What does your faith tradition say? It is important to give your children factual information — and to be specific about how your beliefs either agree with, or differ from science.

You can be an important role model for your teen. Young people often find it confusing when parents talk about a value regarding sexuality, and then act in a way that does not support that value. Common values about sexuality and relationships that most people support include honesty, equality, responsibility and respect for differences. Acting on your values and being a good role model are powerful messages for your children.

Talking about sex should be a conversation, not a lecture. Instead of talking at your teen, find out what he or she thinks and feels about sexuality and relationships. Ask open-ended questions that begin “How do you feel about ...,” for example). Then you can share information and respond to questions in ways that resonate with the belief system your teens are developing for themselves.

The majority of teenagers have their first sexual experience in high school. Surveys indicate that fewer than two percent of adolescents have sex by their 12th birthday. However, 16 percent have sex by age 15; 33 percent at age 16; 48 percent have sex by age 17; as do 61 percent of 18 year olds and 71 percent of 19 year olds. There is little difference between males and females in the timing of first sex.

These statistics provide evidence that parents should talk to their children about sex sooner rather than later. Too often, parents think they need to wait until they collect enough information and energy to be prepared to have “THE TALK” with their adolescents. However, sexuality is a part of every

person's life from the moment he or she is born. It's important, to start the conversation early, and to make it clear to your adolescent that you are always willing to talk about sexuality whenever questions arise for them, or when a "teachable moment" occurs.

Facts about sexual safety should always be included in the conversation. The safest way to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases is abstinence. That means not having vaginal, anal or oral sex. Teaching abstinence exclusively, however, does not stop most teenagers from engaging in sexual activity or being victims of rape.

Admit that talking about sex may be awkward. Remember to keep your sense of humor throughout conversations with your adolescent. The conversation doesn't have to be tense and uncomfortable unless you make it that way.

Adolescents may make some mistakes involving sex, and will need nonjudgmental guidance and support from parents to get through these rough times. If your adolescent makes a poor decision regarding sexual behavior, try not to panic. This is common and can be used as a teaching moment, hopefully guiding the teen toward better choices in the future. Often teens make mistakes because of misinformation or peer pressure. The books listed at the end of this handout can help provide teens with information to help them feel empowered to make good decisions about their sexual health and behavior.

Adolescents are sensitive to messages from parents that communicate shame about the body, sexual identity, or gender identity. Parents can reinforce the message that adolescents are valuable, loveable people. Let your teen know you are interested in his or her thoughts and feelings about any topic, whether it's sexuality, school, religion or the future. Praise your teen for sharing feelings with you. Correct misinformation gently. Praise teens for living their values.

Finding out your teen is sexually active

Whether your adolescent discloses sexual activity to you, or you find out by accident — finding condoms in his or her room, for instance — the way you react can make a huge difference. Adolescents commonly worry about how their parents will react. Some may feel embarrassed, and others just aren't sure how to talk about it. Remember that adolescents ultimately make their own decisions about their sex lives, but parents can help guide them to make good decisions about their sexual health and relationships.

First, it is important to be as loving and supportive as possible. The best thing that you can do is listen and try to stay open, no matter how you feel about what your teen tells you. Remember that adolescents who have positive and supportive relationships with their parents have fewer sex partners, use condoms more consistently, and take fewer risks than teens who lack parental support.

Reassure your adolescent that you do not think about him or her any differently now that you know about the sexual activity. It can help to express your unconditional love and support.

Try to avoid lecturing or asking too many questions. This can make your adolescent shut down. Try alternating active listening with general questions about sexual health such as "What are you doing for protection and birth control?", and the relationship — "Do you feel good about yourself when you're with him/her?"

If you find your adolescent is engaging in risky sexual behaviors such as unprotected sex, not using condoms consistently, or not using birth control, use it as an opportunity to teach good sexual health. **Offer to take your teen to a health center for an STD screen, help identify places offering free condoms, and look into options for birth control together.**

End the initial conversation when the adolescent is unable or unwilling to talk. Pressuring teens to talk makes it less likely they'll seek your advice in the future. **Check-in regularly about your adolescent's sexual health and relationships during relaxed times**, not just when there is an issue or conflict.

Do's and Don'ts

Do

- Give your adolescent comprehensive sex education — talk about STDs, pregnancy prevention, and how to have healthy, respectful and consensual sexual relationships.
- Buy or borrow good sexuality education books for yourself and your adolescent.
- Talk about your values *and* the facts of sex education.
- Begin the conversation early, and check-in often with your adolescent.
- Practice active listening when your teen expresses opinions and ideas about sex and relationships.

Don't

- Rely on abstinence-only sex education, or assume your adolescent will abstain from sexual behaviors.
- Wait to give “THE TALK.”
- Lecture your teen.
- Panic if your teen's sexual behaviors or values are different from your own.

Resources

Books for Parents

How to Talk with Teens about Love, Relationships, and S-E-X. Amy G. Miron and Charles D. Miron. Free Spirit Publishing, 2001.

This easy-to-understand book contains real life examples; and covers a wide range of topics, from how to initiate a conversation, to sexual development and sexual orientation. Different lifestyles, beliefs and morals are taken into consideration.

Why Do They Act That Way?: A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen. Dr. David Walsh. Atria Books, 2005.

In *Why Do They Act That Way?*, the authors explain in understandable terms scientific findings about the development of the brain, puberty, moodiness, risk-taking, miscommunication, fatigue and other common teenage behavior problems. The book provides real-life examples and sample dialogues to teach parents how to communicate with their adolescents about numerous issues.

Books for Adolescents

Boy's Guide to Becoming a Teen and Girl's Guide to Becoming a Teen. The American Medical Association, 2006.

These books cover a range of topics to help boys and girls understand the physical and emotional changes that they will experience during puberty. The book offers information about reproductive-system development, nutrition, skin care and relationships.

Sex: A Book for Teens: An Uncensored Guide to Your Body, Sex, and Safety. Nikol Hasle. Zest Books, 2010.

This humorous yet straightforward book helps teens understand different forms of sex, masturbation, sexual orientation and gender identity, along with body issues, relationships, birth control, and protection against diseases.

S.E.X.: The All-You-Need-To-Know Progressive Sexuality Guide to Get You Through High School and College. Heather Corinna. Da Capo Press, 2007.

The authors provide information on reproductive anatomy, dealing with puberty, birth control, relationships, sexual activities and STD prevention.