

## **PARENT SERIES**

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# **Sexual Health, and Sexual Assault Prevention**

## *Adolescent Sexuality and Sexual Health*

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Although sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and sexual violence affect individuals of all ages, they can take a particular toll on adolescents. About half of all new STD infections that occur in the U.S. each year affect individuals ages 15-24. Similarly, instances of sexual assault, dating violence, and sexual coercion are all too common among high school and college-age youth.

Teenage pregnancy also has many long-term impacts on teen parents and their families.

The good news is that there is a lot parents can do to help their adolescents protect themselves and have healthy, respectful sexual relationships. This handout offers information to help you talk to your adolescent about the risks of STDs and pregnancy, practicing safer sex, reducing their risk of sexual assault, and engaging in consensual sex.

### **Pregnancy Prevention**

Although teen births in the U.S. have been declining, more than 273,000 infants were born to teens ages 15-19 in 2013.

*The best way to prevent pregnancy is to not have sex.* However, since over half of teens are sexually active, they need to know that the proper and consistent use of contraceptives is important. Condoms and birth control pills are most commonly used, but the most effective types of birth control are intrauterine devices (IUDs) and Long-Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC). To prevent STDs, however, condoms should be used every time.

### **Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)**

#### **Types of STDs**

STDs are diseases passed from one person to another through sexual contact. These include chlamydia, gonorrhea, genital herpes, human papillomavirus (HPV), syphilis and HIV. Anyone who is sexually active (vaginal, anal or oral) can get an STD and some, such as herpes and HPV, are spread by skin-to-skin contact. STDs are common among adolescents and young adults; half of the two million new cases per year of STDs are from people ages 15-24.

Young peoples' bodies are more susceptible to these diseases. Many individuals with STDs do not show symptoms for a long time, but the diseases can still cause harm without symptoms. Sexually active teens should be regularly tested for STDs.

#### **Treating STDs**

Some STDs, like chlamydia and gonorrhea, can be treated with prescribed medications. If not treated, these STDs can cause infertility. There is also an increased chance of getting HIV. Other STDs, such as herpes, cannot be cured but there are medicines to help manage symptoms.

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection. Some types can cause genital warts and cancer. There are vaccines that can prevent these health problems. All girls and boys, 11-12 years old, should be vaccinated for HPV.

HPV vaccines are given in three shots over six months. Getting *all* doses is important. If not vaccinated during this age range, then catch-up vaccines are recommended for young men through age 21 and young women through age 26.

### **STD Prevention**

Latex condoms, used consistently and correctly, can help prevent STDs. Both young men and women need to know to use condoms *every time* they have sex, whether oral, vaginal, or anal, and how to use condoms.

That includes storing them, inspecting them for defects, putting them on, and disposing of them after use. There are both male and female condoms for many sexual activities with members of the opposite or same sex.

### **Sexual Assault Prevention**

#### **Consent and Coercion**

Adolescents need to hear how important it is that the first sexual experience be positive, consensual and in the context of a caring relationship. Talk to your teens about how to tell when someone gives or withdraws consent, and the responsibility to honor their own and other people's bodies. Recognizing and responding to sexual coercion — pressuring or inducing guilt — should be discussed.

As adolescents take on more freedom, their social networks grow. Teens attend social events and parties, and go on dates. These social interactions are necessary for adolescent development, but it's important to teach young men and women how to navigate these situations safely, particularly in regards to consent and sexual assault.

#### **The Meaning of Consent**

Talk to your teen about what consent is and isn't. Consent means that both people in a sexual encounter must agree to it, and either person may decide at any time to withdraw consent and stop the activity. Consenting to one behavior does not obligate you to consent to any other behaviors. Consenting on one occasion does not obligate you to consent on any other occasion.

#### **What to Tell Teens About Giving and Recognizing Consent**

Make sure your teens know the easiest way to tell if a person wants to give consent is to ask him or her, and to get a verbal, and enthusiastic "yes!" Guessing or trying to interpret signals are not accurate methods. If partners seem hesitant or uncomfortable, both parties should stop.

#### ***Ensure Your Teens Know to:***

- Reassure hesitant partners that they don't need to do anything they don't want to do.
- Ask what's wrong.
- Stop immediately if a partner says "no."

#### **Age of Legal Consent**

The age of consent varies by country, and within the U.S., by state. Most states set 16-18 years as the minimum age of consent. It's important that teens know the age of consent in the states in which they

live. Having sex with someone under the age of consent is a crime called “statutory rape,” even if the underage person says that she or he wanted the sexual behavior to take place.

### **Consent and Intoxication**

A person who has been drinking or using drugs cannot give consent. This means that even if an intoxicated person seems eager to engage in sexual behavior, doing so can be considered sexual assault or rape.

### **Date Rape**

Educate your teen about date rape. Many people imagine rape as a stranger in a dark alley attacking a victim. But most people who are raped know the attacker. Sometimes this happens in the context of a date or a party, and is known as “date rape.”

***Alert your teen to the fact that date rape is common:*** one in four girls and one in six boys experience rape or attempted rape before age 25. Although girls are more often victims, boys can be raped too.

***Encourage your teen to stay sober and with a friend at parties or social events.*** Sexual assault risk is higher when people are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, because decision-making is impaired and inhibitions are lowered. Teens should make a rule to stay with friends and to monitor each other at parties. Additionally, date-rape drugs may be used to render a victim unconscious and limit memory. Such drugs are often odorless and tasteless. Use of date rape drugs is a federal crime.

***Talk to your teen about how healthy relationships require respect, including respect for a person’s wish not to do anything sexual.*** Rape is not about sex or passion. Forced sex is an act of violence and aggression. It has nothing to do with love.

***Avoid victim-blaming.*** Rape is always the rapist's fault. Rape is ultimately a crime of power and control; it is not a crime of passion and is not really even about sex. People never “ask for it” because of the clothes they wear, or the way they act. If sex is forced against someone's will; if someone was coerced into a sexual act; or if the person was unable to give consent, it’s rape — even if two people are dating or married, or have had sex before.

Victim blaming is extremely common, and this is one major reason that many adolescents who are raped are hesitant to tell anyone. If you encounter an adolescent who was raped, it’s important to express support and reassurance that it was not his or her fault.

***If an adolescent tells you he or she has been raped or sexually assaulted, believe it.*** It’s a misconception that people lie about being sexually assaulted. Only 2-5 percent of sexual assault reports are false.

### **Online Sexual Activity and Pornography**

***Educate your adolescent about the dangers of engaging in sexual behavior online or through text messaging.*** Adolescents can get in a lot of trouble by sending or receiving naked or sexualized pictures through social media. Nothing posted online or sent through text-message is guaranteed to stay private. Depending on state laws, adolescents can get in trouble for production and distribution of child pornography.

*Adolescents may seek out sexual information and pornography on the internet.* It's important to talk with teens about how pornography does not represent real relationships, and to discuss values of respect for self and others. It's also important to clarify that pornography is produced for entertainment and presents an unrealistic view of sex. Pornography presents many complex issues and teenagers should be discouraged from viewing it.

### **Sexual Assault Resources**

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673

RAINN - Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network: <https://ohl.rainn.org/online/>