

Talking With Your Teen About Sex

Youths are exposed to sexual messages every day—on the TV, on the internet, in movies, in magazines, and in music. Sex in the media is so common that you might think 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 healthy sexual behavior or gives correct information.

Your teen needs a reliable, honest source to turn to for answers, and the best source is you. You may feel uneasy when talking with your teen about sex, but your guidance is important. Beyond the basic facts about sex, your teen needs to learn from you about your family values and beliefs. This needs to be an ongoing discussion and not just one “big talk.”

Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help you talk with your teen about this important and sensitive subject.

Why should I talk with my teen about sex?

You are the best person to teach your teen about sex, relationships, love, commitment, and respect, both through discussion and by your own example.

Parents often fear that if they talk about sex, their teen may want to try it. Teens are curious about sex, whether you talk with 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 sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or becoming pregnant.

Talking about sex should begin when your children first ask 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 openly discuss sex with their parents 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 possibility shouldn’t stop you from talking about sex and sexuality.

Before children reach their early teen years, they should know about

- 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 an STI or virus, 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 on your values. Be ready to answer questions like

- When can I start dating?
- When is it OK to kiss a boy or girl?
- How will I know when I’m ready to have sex?
- Is oral sex really sex?
- Won’t having sex help me keep my boyfriend or girlfriend?
- How do I say no?
- What do I do if someone tries to force me to have sex?

Answer your teen’s questions according to your values, even if you think your values are old-fashioned. If you feel strongly that sex before marriage is wrong, share this feeling 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 topics include

- **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 about 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 getting STIs and becoming pregnant, and it provides less emotional stress if there’s a breakup.
- **Sex and STIs.** Teens need to know that having sex exposes them to the risk of getting STIs. The only sure way to prevent STIs is not to have sex. Common STIs include chlamydia, gonorrhea, human papillomavirus (HPV) infection, herpes, HIV/AIDS, and trichomoniasis. HPV is the main cause of anal, cervical, and penile cancer.
- **Reducing the risk of getting STIs.** Condoms (male or female) are the safest method to reduce the risk of getting most STIs and should always be used. Also, postponing sex until the later teen years or adulthood reduces the risk. If both partners are abstinent before marriage or are in a long-term, mature relationship; have never had an STI; and have sex only with each other, 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 again is monogamy. Monogamy can mean having only one sexual partner at a time or only one sexual partner in a lifetime. Being in a sexual relationship with one person for a long time lowers the rate of infection, compared to being sexually active with more than one person or someone who changes partners after some time.
- **Birth control.** Teens 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. Teens are able to access birth control from a health care professional without parental permission in many states.

Teens also need to keep in mind that birth control pills, the birth control shot, contraceptive patches, rings, implants, and intrauterine devices prevent only pregnancy; they don’t protect against getting STIs, including HIV/AIDS. Condoms and another reliable birth control method need to be used each time to help reduce the risk of getting STIs and becoming pregnant.

- **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 your teen 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 reduce the risk of experiencing date rape.
- **Sexuality.** This is a difficult topic for many parents, but your teen probably has many questions about heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality. Many teens and 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 sex or has a crush on a teacher of the same sex. 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 with 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, a bedroom or bathroom.

How do I talk with my teen about sex?

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.

Here are tips that may help make talking with your teen easier.

- **Be prepared.** Read about the subject so that 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 step may make it easier to talk with your teen when the time comes. Speak calmly and clearly.

- **Be honest.** Let your teen know that talking about sex isn’t easy for you, but you think it’s important that information about sex comes from you. And even though you would prefer that your values be accepted, decisions about sex are ultimately 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 sex can lead to 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 with your teen about sex, ask your pediatrician; a trusted support such as a relative, schoolteacher, counselor, or nurse; or a religious leader such as 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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