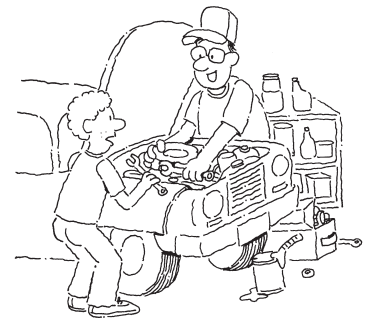


Talking to Your Young Teen About Sex and Sexuality

Guidelines for Parents



Sex seems to be everywhere these days—on television, in the movies, and in popular songs. Sex in the media is so common that you might think that your young teenager already knows everything he or she needs to know about sex. In fact, your teenager may claim that he or she already knows everything about sex, but this is not true. Teens today need information about sex more than ever, and you are still the best source for that information. The American Academy of Pediatrics offers the following tips to help you talk to your teen about this important and sensitive subject.

Why should I talk to my teen about sex?

Talks about sex should begin when your child first asks a question like “where do babies come from?”. Children usually start asking such questions at age 3 or 4. Waiting until your child is a teenager to have “the big talk” means your child will probably learn his first lessons about sex from someone other than you. Studies show that children who learn about sex from friends instead of their parents are more likely to have sex before marriage. They are also more likely to have sex at a young age, and to have more than one sexual partner before marriage. You can have a great effect on your child by talking to him about sex even at a young age.

What should I tell my teen about sex?

Well before they reach their early teens, both boys and girls should already know:

- The basics of sexual “plumbing,” that is, the names and functions of male and female sex organs
- The purpose and meaning of puberty (moving into young womanhood or young manhood)
- The function of the menstrual cycle (period)
- What sexual intercourse is and how women become pregnant

Once your child becomes a teenager, the focus of your talks about sex should shift. You should begin to talk to your teen about the social and emotional aspects of sex, and about your values. You will want to deal with issues that help your teenager answer questions like these:

- “When should I start dating?”
- “When is it okay 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)?”

You should answer your teen’s questions based on your own value system—even if you think your values are old-fashioned by today’s standards. If you feel strongly that sex before marriage is wrong, you should tell your teenager that, but be sure to 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.

You also need to listen to what your teenager is saying. Find out what she knows about sex and try to answer her questions as clearly and directly as possible.

Other important topics to address are:

- **Resisting pressure to have sex:** Teens face a lot of peer pressure to have sex. If your teenager is not ready to have sex, she may feel left out. Help her understand that many teenagers decide to wait to have sex.
- **Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and how to prevent them:** Teenagers need to know that having sex exposes them to the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. Your teen should also know that AIDS is a leading cause of death in young people, aged 15 to 24. These young people were probably infected with HIV when they were teenagers. The only sure way to prevent STDs is not to have sex. Explain to your teen that if she chooses to have sex, using a latex condom every time is the only proven way to lower the risk of getting STDs. Be sure to explain that even condoms do not eliminate the risk.
- **Birth Control:** Even if you have made it clear that you would prefer that your teenager wait to have sex, your teen still needs basic information about birth control. (Both girls and boys need to know about birth control.) Your teen may decide to have sex despite your wishes. Without birth control information, an unplanned pregnancy might result. Be sure to explain that birth control pills, shots (Depo-Provera), and implants (Norplant) only prevent pregnancy. They do not protect against sexually transmitted diseases. Only latex condoms protect against STDs, including HIV/AIDS. Both condoms and another reliable birth control method need to be used each time.
- **Acquaintance (date) rape:** Acquaintance rape is a serious problem for teens. It happens when a person your teenager knows (for example, a date, friend, or neighbor) forces her (or him) to have sex. Make sure your teenager understands that “no always means no.” Discuss with your teen that avoiding drugs and alcohol may make date rape less likely to happen.
- **Forms of sexuality (heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality):** This is a difficult topic for many parents. However, your teen probably has many questions about the different forms human sexuality can take. Many young people go through a stage when they wonder, “Am I gay?” It often happens when a teenager realizes that he is attracted to a friend of the same sex, or that he has a crush on a teacher of the same sex. This is normal and does not mean your teenager is gay or bisexual. Sexual identity may not be firmly set until adulthood. You should also let your teen know that if he is gay or bisexual, you will not reject him.
- **Masturbation:** Masturbation is a topic few people feel comfortable discussing. But it is a normal and healthy part of human sexuality. Discuss this in terms of your values.

When talking about sex with your teen is difficult

Talking about sex with your teenager may be a hard thing to do. Perhaps you find it embarrassing to talk about sex. Maybe you think talking about it will make your teen want to have sex. Maybe your teen does not seem to want to talk to you about sex.

Don't worry. Many parents find talking about sex with their children hard. Sex is a very personal and private matter. If talking about sex is hard for you, try these tips:

- Be honest. Explain your discomfort to your teenager. Let her know that talking about sex is not easy for you—perhaps because of your own background—but that you think it is important for her to get her information about sex from you.
- If certain subjects make you uncomfortable, try speaking slowly, calmly, and coolly.
- Practice with your spouse or partner, a friend, or another parent. Knowing what you want to say and going over the words may make it easier to talk about sex with your teen when the time comes.
- If you just cannot talk to your teen about sex, ask your pediatrician to provide her with sex-related information. A trusted aunt or uncle, or a minister, priest, or rabbi may also be able to help. Finally, many parents find it useful to give their teenagers a book on human sexuality.

“Won't talking about sex with my son make him want to have sex?”

Parents often fear that even talking about sex may make it seem exciting to their children and make them want to try it. Teenagers 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 difficult decisions about sex, and it may make it less likely that he or she will be exposed to STDs or have an unplanned pregnancy. Teenagers who have poor information about sex (usually those who learn about sex from friends) or who have no information at all are the most likely to get into trouble.

“I want to talk to my teenager about sex, but every time I try to start a conversation, she just stares at me.”

It is not always easy to talk to your teenager about anything, let alone something as private and difficult as sex. Your teen may be embarrassed to talk to you about sex. She may fear that if she opens up to you about sex, you might use what she says against her later. She may also feel that what she thinks about sex is none of your business.

Teenagers do need privacy. However, they also need information and guidance from parents. Try to strike a balance. Let your teen know that while you would prefer that she would accept your values, she will have to make her own sexual decisions. Give your teenager a chance to share what she thinks and to ask questions. If your teen does not say anything when you try to talk about

sex, say what you have to say anyway. Your message will get through. If your teen disagrees with what you have to say or gets angry, take heart. This means that she has at least heard what you have said. These talks will help your teenager learn to think about her actions. They will also help her develop a solid value system, even if it is different from your own.

For more information, see the following American Academy of Pediatrics Publications:

The Correct Use of Condoms: A Message to Teens

Deciding to Wait: Guidelines for Teens

Know the Facts About HIV and AIDS: Guidelines for Parents

Making the Right Choice: Facts for Teens on Avoiding Pregnancy

Puberty: Information for Girls and Boys

The Pelvic Exam: Guidelines for Teens

Sex Education: A Bibliography for Children, Adolescents, and Their Parents

Television and sex

Television exposes children and teens to adult behaviors by showing these actions as being normal and risk-free. Being sexually active is often shown on TV as a popular thing to do. Because sexual activity happens so often on TV, the message that is sent is “everybody does it” with no harmful results. In addition, young teens may think that these behaviors will make them more grown-up.

Ten percent of adolescent girls in the United States get pregnant each year. Although TV viewing is not the only way that your teen learns about sexuality, the risks and results of sexual activity are not given equal time on TV. Programs on many cable TV channels are often even more extreme in the way they portray sex. This makes it even more important for you to talk about these issues with your young teen.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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