



TIPS FOR TALKING WITH YOUR TEEN ABOUT SEXUALITY

As parents, we really make a difference when we talk with our kids about sex.

Teens who report having positive conversations with their parents about sex are more likely to delay sex, have fewer partners, and use condoms and other forms of birth control when they do have sex.

Here are some tips for making it easier to talk with your teen about sexuality:

Don't be discouraged if you're uncomfortable.

It's common for parents and kids to feel embarrassed or uncomfortable when talking to one another about sex. Owning up to that can help relieve the tension. We might try saying, "It's totally normal that this feels awkward, but I love you and care about you so we need to talk about important things like this." In time and with practice, it will get easier.

Give truthful, useful, and accurate information.

It's important to convey our own values about sex and sexuality. It's also important to prepare our children to make responsible choices whenever they become sexually active. By age 19, seven in 10 teens have already had intercourse. So in addition to conveying our own values regarding sexual relationships, it's important to talk with teens about preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Look for "teachable moments."

Every day, life provides lots of opportunities for talking about sexuality. When watching a TV show that features a young person going through puberty or going out on a date, seeing an ad that prompts thoughts about body acceptance, or running into a pregnant neighbor, we can use that to initiate conversations with our children. Having a starter can make the conversation more natural.

Teens often name their parents as the biggest influence in their decisions about sex.

Spend more time listening than talking, and get to know the world our teens live in.

What pressures are they dealing with? What do they consider normal? It's often tempting to jump in and give our point of view, but if we spend some time just listening and asking questions, we help our kids learn how to explain their ideas clearly. We get to know each other even better, and we build trust by showing we really care about their thoughts and feelings.

Try to understand what motivates teens.

It's important to communicate with kids about the importance of delaying sexual behavior until they are old enough to protect themselves and their partners. To do that well, it's helpful to understand and keep in mind the reasons teens give for having or delaying sex. Teens often cite a desire to feel closer to a boyfriend or girlfriend, or the erroneous belief that "everyone's doing it" as reasons for having sex. In contrast, they cite a fear of upsetting their parents or that sex will interfere with their future endeavors as reasons for delaying sex. We can talk with our teens about what motivates them around sex so we can better understand how to help them make the best choices for themselves.

Don't just talk.

Parents can follow a few simple guidelines that will make teens less likely to engage in risky behavior such as drinking, smoking, having unprotected sex, or having sex before they are ready:

- We should know where our teens are and whom they are with, and we should not allow them to spend a lot of time alone without adults present.
- When teens are invited to each other's house or to a party, we can find out if there are going to be adults present.
- We can also discourage our teens from going out on school nights and dating or hanging out with older teens.
- Our teens are less likely to engage in risky behavior if we know their friends' parents, so getting to know the parents of our kids' friends, and especially the parents of anyone our son or daughter is dating, is a good idea.

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