

Talking to Your Teen About Sexuality

Human sexuality is a natural, lifelong process. It's all about discovering who we are, how we express ourselves, and how we develop intimate relationships. By age 12 or 14, most children are in the process of maturing into adults physically, emotionally, cognitively and socially. For girls, the transition usually takes three to four years, and for boys four to five years. Although they are separating more from their parents and their family, they still have a very intense need for nurturing relationships. The adolescent who has an abundance of support, communication, and understanding in the family will move through this transition with greater self-regard and confidence.

Talking with our teens about sexuality is one of the most challenging aspects of parenting. While we most likely have explained the "birds and bees" to our children when they were young, it is a different case when these children have developed into teenagers. It's a time when a teen's sexuality and sexual activity are no longer theoretical. It's a time when the stakes are higher. It's also a time when teens need information the most, yet, they may be the least receptive to receiving that information from their parents. The good news is that most teens ARE listening to what their parents are saying despite what we think!

As parents, we need to remember that for teens, it's not cool to discuss sex with your folks! Teens often act very nonchalant so as not to be made fun of. Their seeming sophistication hides what they don't know. In spite of all this, we need to impart information and our values so our teens will be well informed in matters of sexuality. Today's teenagers are receiving an abundance of education about sexuality from television, magazine, movies, MTV, and their friends on the street, however, it

may not be accurate education. The teaching of values about sexuality needs to come from the teenagers' parents.

Clearly our children are living in a world that is very different from the one in which we grew up. There's more explicit sex, teens are becoming sexually active at an earlier age, and the risks of unprotected sex are high. We know that sexuality plays an important role in adolescent development, and we know that there are many external influences on our children. We are also aware of the inherent risks of early and unprotected sex. What can we, as parents, do to support our children and help them make good choices in their lives? Communicating our concerns and guiding our teens so they can make healthy and sound choices is essential, but it's not always easy to do.

Challenges of Talking About Sexuality With Your Teen

What makes it difficult for some parents to talk with their children about sex? Here are some of the common reasons:

1. Some parents feel that they don't have enough technical information about sexuality to give their children accurate information.
2. Some children are embarrassed to initiate the subject with their parents, or they may feel guilty about their sexual thoughts.
3. Many children feel anxious when their parents first bring up the subject of sex, and to hide their anxiety, respond as if they are bored.
4. Parents and children have trouble seeing each other as individuals with sexual needs and desires.
5. Many teenagers feel they "know it all."
6. Many parents feel uncomfortable with the subject.

Your role as a parent

An important first step is to realize that your role is to be an influencer - not a controller. Your values will guide your teen to make decisions that are sound and healthy. We should expect that our children may not necessarily take on all of our values, but it is nevertheless critical to make known to them what we feel is important about the way we conduct our lives. No child ever lives in a home for fifteen years (or more) and cannot tell what his parents' values are. Whether we communicate with them openly, demonstrate by example, or comment on the behaviors and attitudes of others, children learn what their parents believe. The messages started with diaper changing, and they set the tone for messages and attitudes that are perpetuated throughout the child's life.

By NOT talking to your child about sexuality, we will add to the confusing messages they receive from other areas in their lives. It is not preferable to say nothing. Your values are vitally important for your child to know. One critical message to make sure your child receives is: "No matter what you do, I will never reject you. NO matter what happens, you can come to me, and I will help you."

Parents want to share opinions, hopes, and dreams for their children. But they also need to be flexible enough to accommodate situations which are not part of the dream they have for their adolescents. Your teen needs social skills, decision-making skills, assertiveness skills, values clarification, factual information, and the ability to feel good about himself.

How to Communicate

Listen to your teenager. You may be surprised at how much information you gain

by simply being a good listener. Your teen's questions or comments often reflect thoughts or underlying concerns she may have trouble putting into words. Try not to be judgmental.

Be an askable parent. This means letting your child know he will not be teased, judged, or punished for asking questions about sexuality. Being askable also sends a message to your child that you understand and respect his natural curiosity about sex and that you acknowledge his emerging sexual adult. It's important to be calm and accepting.

Use Humor. A few laughs may help break the ice or ease tensions when either of you is uncomfortable. Without using; "When I was a teenager" (it turns off kids), use something from your own experiences, such as a disastrous first kiss. Do not minimize the fact there are times when a serious tone is the only approach

Share your values; acknowledge those of your teen. If you want your teen to respect your values, you will need to respect hers. You might say, "I know that you believe such and such, and I can understand why you do, but that is not the way I see it." You can agree to disagree.

Discuss ways to handle peer pressure. Social pressure is often the number one reason teens have sexual intercourse. Studies have shown that many teens feel that their peers are having sex, although that is clearly not the case. They want to fit in and believe they will by becoming sexually active. You can help your child handle peer pressure by:

- Pointing out that not everyone is "doing it" even though it may seem as if it is true.

- Assisting him or her in understanding that refusing to have sexual intercourse does not make a teen a prude or a baby. It shows that, like an adult, he or she has carefully considered the pros and

cons of sex and has decided it is not right for him/her at this time

- Helping him/her understand that having sexual intercourse does not transform adolescents into adults.

- Helping him/her see that having intercourse is never a proof or test of love. Waiting until one is emotionally ready to accept the consequences is the true test of maturity.

- Helping him/her acknowledge that having sexual relations will not solve the problems of a relationship that is in trouble.

- Finding ways to help him/her increase self-esteem so resisting peer pressure will be easier. Teens with a strong sense of self will not be as influenced by peer pressure as those seeking approval and acceptance.

- Teaching him/her the language to use when being pressured into behaving in ways that are not in his/her best interest.

Use teachable moments for discussions about sexuality.

As parents, you are competing with the media and its sexual messages, but these very programs and ads can serve you well. Your role as sexuality educator can turn these influences into teachable moments and educational opportunities. Have discussions with your kids about what they see on television, in music videos, magazines, news events, etc. Ask questions such as; “Do you think this ad is realistic?”, “How do you feel watching this video?”, “What do you think about this?”, and “What do you think the consequences of their behavior might be?”

Give your teenagers effective language to use when they are confronted with tough issues, and help them develop strong decision-making skills. Parents should teach their teens to think of ways to say whatever needs to be said about sexual situations directly, honestly, and appropriately. Discuss with your adolescent the difference among passive, assertive, and

aggressive responses. Parents are instrumental in suggesting to their teens that being firm and clear about sexuality will serve them well as they face tough issues and make responsible decisions.

Respect your teenager’s privacy. You may be curious about what your teenager is doing for hours in his/her room with the door closed. Respect your child’s privacy, as you would expect him/her to respect yours. Many teens report that a lack of privacy is a major source of tension between them and their parents.

Respond with understanding to awkward situations. What if you discover your teen’s boyfriend or girlfriend in your child’s bedroom? In some situations, you may strongly object. However your values tell you to respond, it is important to show your children respect and understanding, while helping them to understand the guidelines you’ve established and the consequences of their choices. This approach allows children to consider the options and make their own decisions - - critical skills they need as adults when you are not there to help.

Take your teen’s first love experience seriously, and don’t minimize it.

Sometimes parents give teens the message that their relationships are just “puppy love” and aren’t really important. The fact is that the first love experience may be the most intense love a person ever feels.

Encourage sexual responsibility. Sexual responsibility indicates that a person is aware of the physical and emotional consequences of becoming sexually involved with another person. It means that a teenager understands that sex can lead to pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted disease, including AIDS. Sexual involvement can also lead to emotional turmoil if a relationship does not work out. Encouraging sexual responsibility is more than saying “wait until marriage” or giving

your child a lecture on condoms. Adolescents clearly need information, however giving them information is NOT giving your approval of their being sexually active, rather it is your saying that unprotected sex can be dangerous.

Establish a set of rules and guidelines for your teen to live by while he/she is in the process of developing his/her own values.

These guidelines act as brakes to stop him/her from making poor decisions before he/she's had enough experiences to make healthy choices. Your rules are designed to protect your child from serious mistakes, some of which have life-time consequences.

Remember that research indicates that talking with teens about sex will not make them more likely to be sexually active.

Research has shown that while sexuality education is unlikely to increase sexual activity, it is more likely to result in teenagers using contraception and safer sex practices when they do become sexually active. You can't control whether your child becomes sexually active by shielding them from the facts. You can, however, balance the messages they get from peers, the media, and other sources by giving them the information they need and the values you would like them to have.

What to Communicate:

Accurate Information

Visit your local library or book store for up-to-date, research-based information for today's youth. As parents, we don't have to know it all, we just have to know where to find the answers, be willing to get them, and be available for open, honest communication.

Unplanned Pregnancy

The United States has the distinction of having the largest number of adolescent pregnancies per year of any developed

country; one million per year. Eighty-five percent of those pregnancies are unplanned. Teens need to be able to recognize pressure lines, know how to respond to them, and know how to prevent pregnancy. Everyone is not "doing it" and we need to let our teenagers know that it's OK not to "do it," even if their friends insist that virginity is obsolete.

Contraceptive Choices

Teenagers should know that the only form of birth control that is 100% effective is abstinence. Teens should also know the other forms of birth control available and how effective each one is at preventing pregnancy and STD's. Federally funded family planning clinics provide contraceptives at no cost, or a reduced cost, depending on the patient's income. Contact your local health department for the nearest clinic.

Date Rape

Both genders need to know what safety measures should be taken as they begin dating. Teens also need to know what role alcohol and other drug use has in lowering inhibitions and diminishing judgment. Teens should be taught assertiveness when dealing with unwanted sexual pressure. They should also be taught about the role of body language and tone of voice. Tips for preventing date rape include: going out with a group, avoiding the use of drugs and alcohol, having your own way of getting home and money for a taxi or phone, not giving mixed messages, not doing anything just to be nice, trusting your instincts, and identifying your limits.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Sexually transmitted diseases are rampant. Three million teenagers are infected annually with an STD. Teens, in general, have several characteristics which make them especially vulnerable to STD's: their sexual behavior is often impulsive, they believe they are immortal, and they live for

the present. Become up-to-date on STD's by reading books, finding information over the Internet, talking to medical professionals, etc. Teens need to know the six sexually transmitted diseases, their symptoms in men and women, their potential consequences, and how to prevent STD's.

AIDS

The Child Welfare League of America reported in a 1993 news release that AIDS is the sixth leading cause of death among young people aged 15-24. One-fifth of the AIDS cases are to persons under 29 years old or younger. Because AIDS often has a 10-year incubation period, many of these cases are contracted in the teen years. Our teenagers need to be fully aware of the AIDS epidemic and how to prevent the disease.

How to Evaluate and Manage Relationships

Sexuality discussions should provide opportunities for teenagers to learn and to practice communication skills that are necessary to assess and assert their decisions while maintaining their friendships. Teens want to be able to have some handle on how to have a good, healthy relationship, and communicate better with their dating partners. They want to avoid being hurt, hurting others, and getting involved in a destructive relationships. Yet we often leave the teen with a real void in learning to manage emotions, sexuality, and relationships. Teach your child the characteristic of healthy, happy relationships, and the signs of unwholesome, unhealthy relationships. Our children also need to understand that if they feel forced to do something just to keep a friend, the friendship isn't a healthy one.

Emotions

Emotional trauma from broken sexual relationships, unhealthy self-esteem and selfish, uncaring behaviors are issues that

need to be addressed with our teens. Condoms don't protect the heart. Teenagers with high self esteem are better able to make wise decisions and avoid "going along with the crowd" just to be popular. Our children need to grow up knowing that people should forgo sex until both parties are old enough to pay its emotional and financial price - - that is to say, until your child is not a child anymore.

Sexual Harassment

Uninvited sexual advances, unwelcome requests for sexual contact, and other verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature when it is not wanted constitutes sexual harassment. Teenagers may face sexual harassment in school or on the job. Sometimes it's confusing as to whether behavior or comments are sexual harassment. A good way to determine this is to ask yourself if it's something you would want someone to say or do to your mother, father, girlfriend, or boyfriend. It's important for your teen to know he or she has a parent or other adult they can talk to if they feel they are being sexually harassed.

Your teenager needs to feel a responsibility not only for the feelings of another but for the life of another. By defining values now, children are able to stick to those values as they grow up, because they realize that sex is a matter of maturity and morality as much as pleasure.

Parental Responsibilities

- U Clarify your values
- U Communicate your values to your child
- U Role model your values
- U Keep the lines of communication open
- U Provide correct information
- U Assess your child's vulnerability and provide assistance where needed
- U Let your child know he/she is loved

Adolescent Responsibilities for Sexuality Decision Making:

- U Learn the facts
- U Clarify your values
- U Understand clearly the risks involved
- U Have a plan of action
- U Recognize potentially risky pressure situations
- U Avoid risky situations
- U Make good decisions
- U Act to avoid a mistake

Resources:

Communicating With Adolescents about Sexuality, Family Information Services, May, 1993.

Holistic Sexuality Education: A Positive Approach to Difficult Issues, Family Information Services, March , 1994.

Sexuality and Relationships: What Teens Want and Need to Know. Family Information Services, July, 1991.

A Parent-Teen Sexual Value Discussion Plan: Promoting Sexual Abstinence, Family Information Services, January, 1996.

Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Family Planning Perspectives*, 1994.

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