

# PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

## Communicating With Your Teen: Talking About SEX

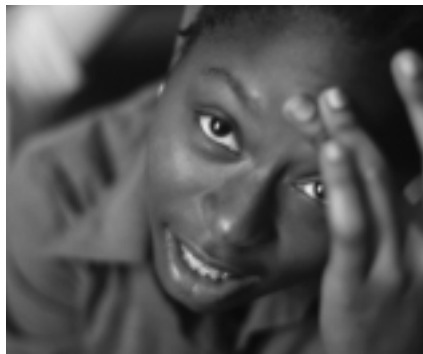


As a parent, you know that the topic of sex is an important one to discuss with your children. But just because the topic is important does not make it easy to talk about. The questions your teen or preteen asks may not have easy answers. This publication, a part of the “Principles of Parenting” series, offers tips for helping you talk with your teen about sex in ways that will help him or her make wise and healthy choices.

### Did you know?

- Sixty-one percent of parents of 8- to 11-year-olds report that their children initiated conversations about reproduction.
- One-third of 10- and 11-year-olds say that pressure to have sex is a big problem for kids their age.
- Approximately 4 million teens will contract a sexually transmitted disease each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- The Kaiser Family Foundation reports that one-half of 12- to 14-year-olds say teens today face a lot of pressure when it comes to sex and relationships.
- Parents think they talk about sex with their teens more than teens think they talk about sex with their parents.
- Parents underestimate the sexual activity of their teens.
- Many teens get a lot of their information about sex from other teens and from the media. Much of this information is not accurate and could lead to unwise decisions about sexual behavior.



Many parents don't want to think about their young teen, or even preteen, being pressured into sexual situations. Many teens will make good choices and delay sexual activity; however, we cannot always predict which ones they will be. Any teen could be faced with pressures to engage in sex. If it is your teen, will he or she be able to make a good choice?

### Getting Started in Helping Your Teen:

While things may not be the same today as they were when you were a teen, many of the feelings and concerns that you had are still true for teens today. As you get ready to talk with your teen about sex, it may be helpful to recall your own experiences as a teen. Use these questions to take a walk down memory lane.

Imagine yourself as you were at 15 years of age, and answer these questions:

- Am I embarrassed about being a virgin?
- Is trying to be popular a good reason to have sex?
- Do I know how to protect myself against pregnancy and infection?
- Am I being pressured to have sex?
- Will having sex make me feel differently about myself?
- Am I considering having sex to get back at my parents?
- Do I know what my sexual limits are?
- Is being in love a good reason to have sex?
- Do I know where to find accurate information about sex?
- How easy is it to talk with my parents about sex?

Many teens believe myths about pregnancy that put them at risk:

**Myth:** There is an absolutely safe period when sexual intercourse cannot cause pregnancy.

**Fact:** While there are times during a woman's menstrual cycle when she is less likely to get pregnant, there is no absolutely safe period. A chance of pregnancy always exists.

**Myth:** Having a male withdraw his penis from a female's vagina before he ejaculates is a good way to prevent pregnancy.

**Fact:** Withdrawal, even before ejaculation, is not an effective way to prevent pregnancy since the penis leaks semen that contains thousands of sperm.

**Myth:** A girl cannot get pregnant the first time she has intercourse.

**Fact:** Girls can and often do become pregnant the first time they have intercourse.

**Myth:** Talking with adolescents about contraception promotes sexual activity.

**Fact:** The opposite has been shown to be true. Informed adolescents tend to delay or reduce sexual activity, especially risky sexual activity.



Information your teen needs to know:

- What to expect during puberty. Teens often wonder "Am I normal?"
- Accurate information about the types and effectiveness of contraceptives and pregnancy.
- Where to obtain contraception, if necessary.
- How to resist sexual pressure.
- How to report situations in which unwanted sexual activity occurs.
- Knowledge about AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and how to prevent them.
- How to judge when a dating relationship is, and is not, good for them.
- What it means to be valued and respected by a dating partner.
- What you, the parent, believe about sexual issues and what moral values or ethical standards you hold.

So ... how do I talk with my teen about sex?

## Prepare

One way to feel comfortable and confident while talking with your teen about sex is to prepare first. Here are some questions you may want to ask yourself.

- *What does my teen need to know?* What are the important facts about sex and sexuality that you think your teen needs to know to make informed, responsible choices? Gather information from good quality resources, such as parent educators, teen experts, and educational books and Web sites. A list of helpful Web sites is at the end of this publication.
- *What do I believe and why do I believe it?* Thinking through what your beliefs are helps you to be clear when you talk with your teen about sex. It is okay to say to your child, "I do not want you to have sex at this time in your life and this is why .... But there are some things about sex that you need to know ...."
- *What are the questions that I am not sure how to answer?* Many parents worry about discussing sex with their kids because of the uncomfortable





questions that teens may ask. Thinking about some of these questions and being prepared to answer them will allow you to be more comfortable during the discussions. For example: “Mom, you said people should not have sex until they are married, but what about Uncle Jim who lives with his girlfriend?” Your prepared answer might be, “Yes, I did say people should wait to have sex until they are married and that is what I believe. But when people are adults, they sometimes make other choices, and I have to respect that. I still love and respect your uncle even though he is making a choice that I disagree with.”

- *What are some general responses to questions my teen might ask and for which I might not have an answer at the time?*

You can say things such as “That is a good question. What do you think about ...?” or “I am not sure about that; let me think about it and we can discuss it later.” Be sure to get back with your child if you have said you will think about a question and talk with him or her later.

- *How do I find answers to tough questions?* Read recent publications from reputable sources. Check the last page of this publication for a list of resources with brief descriptions.

Talk with trusted family members or friends, who you think have done a good job raising their teens. Find out their approaches to talking with their teens about sex and the kinds of information they have used.

Consult with knowledgeable professionals, such as parent educators and youth specialists, for information.

Contact professionals at your county Extension office, health center, or community center.

## Initiate

It will help to get the discussion started if you find the best way for you and your teen to talk openly. Here are some things to consider that may help you and your teen talk more easily.

- *Decide together on a good time and place for the discussion.*

Teens differ in where they feel most comfortable talking. It helps to pick a time and place when you will not be distracted by the noise of television or other people’s activities. Talking in the kitchen while



the two of you are alone cleaning up after dinner may be ideal for some parents and teens. Others might prefer talking during a weekend walk outdoors. Pick the time and setting that feel best to both of you. Whatever you choose should help you feel unhurried and uninterrupted.

- *Start with a statement such as the following:* “I know this can be tough for us to discuss, but I really want to talk with you . . .” or “It’s hard for me to talk about this. My parents and I never discussed these things, but I want you to have someone to talk to.”
- *Use open-ended questions such as the following:* You have probably heard a lot of different things about sex. Tell me about the things you think are the most accurate (the most confusing; the most weird, etc.).

When it comes to sex, what are some of the things you are unsure about?

What is your understanding of how people can get pregnant (STDs, HIV)? How can people avoid getting pregnant (STDs, HIV)?

What are some of the questions that your friends have about sex?

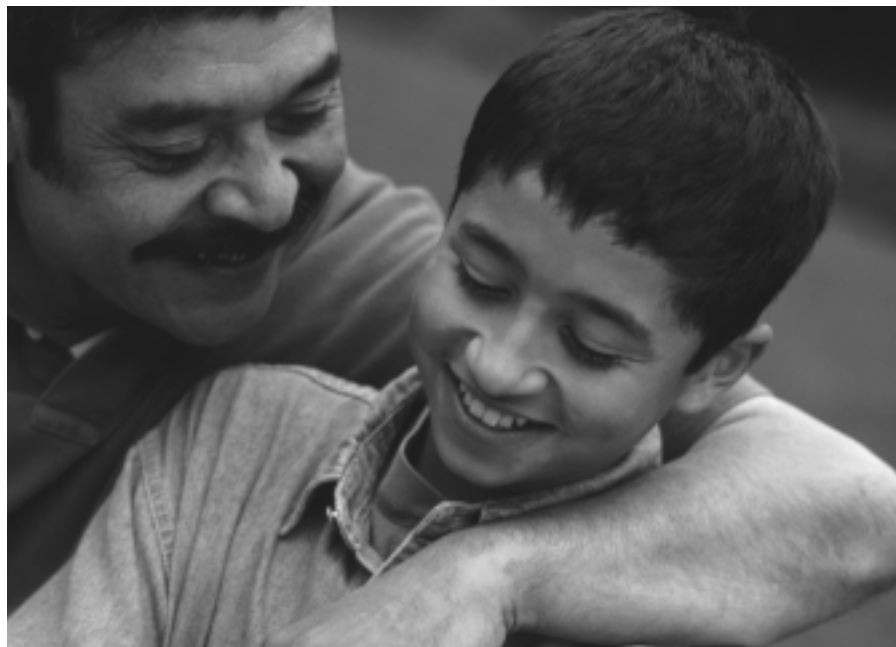
When do you think is the right time for a person to start having sex?

- *Have resources available*—books, Web sites, pamphlets, etc. *Have other people available whom you or your teen can talk with if there are questions or topics that you cannot deal with.* Teachers, counselors, neighbors, friends, ministers, and other parents can be helpful.

## Continue

Keep the communication going. Expect discussions to happen over time. The first conversations may only last a few minutes but will open doors for you and your teen to have future discussions. Once your teen realizes you are comfortable and willing to talk, he or she will probably come to you with questions. Here are specific ways to keep the lines of communication open:

- *Ask your teen:* “What do you think about the things your friends say they do with their boyfriends or girlfriends?”
- *When watching TV, ask questions such as* “These two seemed to fall in love quickly. What do you think is going on?” “What do you think about how she treats her boyfriend?” “They seemed to take a lot of chances. What do you think about that?”
- *Use naturally occurring events* that can help you keep open lines of communication about sex:
  - ✓ A friend’s pregnancy
  - ✓ Your teen’s comments about others at school
  - ✓ Television shows that highlight sex and relationships
  - ✓ Lyrics to music
- *Many teens want to talk about the favorable aspects of intimate relationships, not just the risks.* Often, parents talk to their teens about how to prevent pregnancy and STDs but



not the reasons why sex is a special, wonderful part of loving relationships. Teens may talk more if they feel their parents are not one sided in their ability to talk about sex.

- *The importance of being able to talk about sex never ends.* Not only will you help your teen deal with sex as a teenager, but you also can serve as a wonderful support for your child when she or he has children.

*Keeping the lines of communication open with your children is one of the best ways to keep them safe!*

## What should I be talking about with my child at different ages?

The answer to this question depends not only on the age of your child but on your child’s maturity level, the kinds of questions your child is asking, and the kinds of behaviors you ob-

serve your child engaging in. The National Parent-Teacher Association offers a general guideline for what is important to discuss with young people in different age groups. While this guideline is meant to be helpful, you should always determine what your child needs as an individual.

### Elementary School

- Correct names of sexual organs
- Sex and reproduction
- Pregnancy
- Healthy relationships
- Personal boundaries and respect for others’ boundaries

### Middle School

- Everything elementary school-age children need to know
- Sexual decision making
- Emotions and consequences of sexual relationships
- Sexually transmitted diseases

### High School

- Everything middle school students need to know
- Dating and relationships
- Contraception



You are not alone if you worry about the tough questions. Some of the topics that many parents struggle with include the following:

*Resisting sexual pressures.*

This topic may sound easy, but simply stating “just say no to sex” is not enough. Teens need to have realistic expectations of how to handle difficult situations related to how far is too far and what their boundaries are.

One way to do this is to role-play with your teen using different settings and how to handle pressures. This can be an uncomfortable but humorous way to explore options.

You also can talk about a teen your child knows who has been successful in resisting sexual pressure. What has your teen seen this other child do to handle these pressures?

*Contraception and safe sex.*

Many parents do not like the thought of their children having sex, but the truth is that many teens do have sex. Parents may be afraid that discussing contraceptives with their children encourages, or at least condones, their adolescents’ engagement in sex. **This is not true.** Research shows that informing teens about contraception is related to less sexual activity and waiting to have sex until they are older.

When talking with your teen about safe sex, you can first say that the safest approach is abstinence and that you strongly prefer that they wait to have sex until they are older. At the same time, you can tell your teen that you want them to know what can happen if people engage in unsafe sex and the things that make it safer. Here, information is power — if teens know how to protect themselves, they are less likely to make poor choices. Also, if teens are aware that they need to protect themselves, they may take the choice of whether to engage in sex much more seriously.

*Teens already engaged in sexual activity.* Some teens will become sexually active regardless of what adults do to prevent it. If this is your teen, it may be hard to keep your emotional reaction calm.

If you are highly upset when you learn that your child is sexually active, it will be important for you to get support from people you trust before talking with your teen.

When you have become calm, it will be important for you to talk with your teen so you can understand how he or she is thinking and feeling about the choice to be sexually active and whether he or she is taking precautions to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Sexually active female teens should have yearly checkups with a gynecologist to ensure that they are healthy. It also would be wise to encourage sexually active male adolescents to be checked regularly for sexually transmitted diseases, since even condom use is not foolproof.

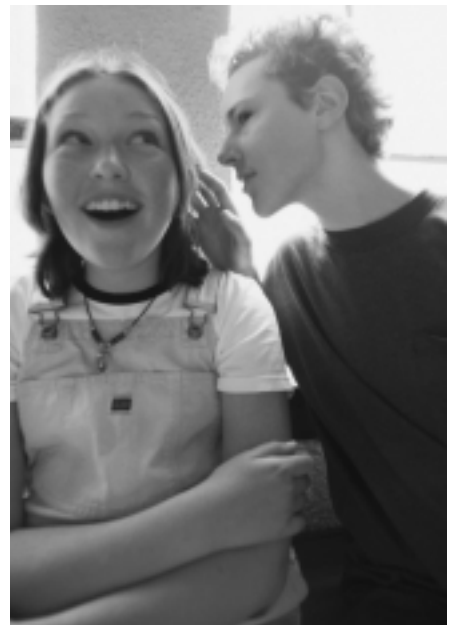
For more information about sexual health and sexually transmitted diseases, see the United States Department of Health and Human Services link to MEDLINEplus Health

Information at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sexuallytransmitteddiseases.html>.

*Parents’ sexual experiences as a teenager.* This topic can be difficult for parents because many do not want their children to make the same mistakes they made. As a parent, you may or may not feel it is okay to talk about your sexual experiences as a teenager.

Depending on the age of your child, your views about discussing your own teenage sexual experiences and your comfort with discussing this information with your teen should be taken into consideration before you share.

If you decide to share information about yourself, talking about why you made the choices you made and what you would like to have done differently may be a way to help your child understand that you understand what he or she is experiencing.



## Helpful Free Electronic Resources

*Advocates for Youth* <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org> supports efforts to help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health.

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*Alabama Cooperative Extension System* <http://www.aces.edu/teens/parenteen/links/sexuality/publications.htm> provides a wide range of research-based publications available on the Web about sexuality.

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*American Social Health Association* <http://www.iwannaknow.org> includes factual information and answers to teens' common questions about sexual health.

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*Facing Facts: Sexual Health for America's Adolescents* [http://www.siecus.org/pubs/Facing\\_Facts.pdf](http://www.siecus.org/pubs/Facing_Facts.pdf) is a guide for parents, health professionals, and policy makers.

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*The Family Education Network* <http://www.familyeducation.com/topic/front/0,1156,20-24310,00.html?relinks> offers information on a range of topics important to families, including teens and sexuality.

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*Kids Health* <http://www.kidshealth.org> gives comprehensive medical information on children's health issues, including parenting tips on talking to kids about sex.

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*National Children, Youth and Families at Risk Initiative* <http://www.nnfr.org/adolsex/> has great topics that deal with difficult subjects between teens and parents.

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"*Our Whole Lives*" <http://www.uua.org/owl/intro.html> is a nonsecular series of sexuality education curricula for five age groups: grades K–1, grades 4–6, grades 7–9, grades 10–12, and adults. This site offers facts about anatomy and human development and offers tips on clarifying values, building interpersonal skills, and understanding the spiritual, emotional, and social aspects of sexuality.

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*Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States* <http://www.siecus.org/pubs/pubs0004.html> contains the "Families Are Talking" newsletter designed to help parents and caregivers talk with their children about sexuality and related issues. Scroll down the page to find the newsletter. Many other helpful resources pertaining to adolescents and sexuality are on this site.

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*Talking with Kids* [www.talkingwithkids.org](http://www.talkingwithkids.org) offers information about talking with kids about all types of difficult subjects.

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*The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy* <http://www.teenpregnancy.org> offers research, resources, and information for parents and community educators, as well as publications and merchandise.

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*The National Parent-Teachers Association* [http://www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/healthsafety/parentsguide\\_sexed.pdf](http://www.pta.org/parentinvolvement/healthsafety/parentsguide_sexed.pdf) offers this informative guide for talking with children and adolescents about sex. Specific pointers for when to talk and what to talk about are offered.

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*Why Abstinent Adolescents Report They Have Not Had Sex: Understanding Sexually Resilient Youth* <http://outreach.missouri.edu/hdfs/journal.htm> is an article by Lynn Blinn Pike, University of Missouri Outreach and Extension.



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**For more information**, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

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