



Living With Your Teen: Teen Sexuality

Many parents fear their children will become sexually active before they're ready. Parents fear an unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), emotional harm, date rape, and sexual abuse. Most parents feel early sexual experiences will harm their children.



Why are teens sexually active?

Teens become sexually active for many reasons. They are experiencing changes in their bodies. For example, hormone levels cause breast development, hair growth, and the deepening of male voices. The hormonal changes may increase teens' sex drive, thus contributing to sexual activity.

In addition to the physical changes taking place, teens are also beginning to seek greater independence. The teen is balancing parent's beliefs, peer group influences, media messages, body changes, and personal values. All of these things contribute to his or her sexual behavior. Researchers studying teen sexuality have found:

- Teens who can't talk with their parents are more likely to have sex early. They're also more likely to begin smoking and drinking earlier.
- Teens whose parents supervise or monitor them closely are likely to begin intercourse later. These parents know where their teenagers are and who they are with. They check to see if there is adult supervision when appropriate.
- The more often parents talk to children about sexuality, the later teens are likely to begin sexual intercourse.
- What kids think their peers are doing affects early intercourse *more* than what their peers are actually doing.
- Teens who are not doing well in school or don't care about education are more likely to have sex at an early age.

Ways to communicate with teens about sex

Most parents feel nervous unprepared to discuss sexuality with their teens. Here are some hints to help you talk with your child:

- Get the facts straight. Many good books can help you learn about adolescent sexuality.
- Don't be afraid to admit to yourself and your teen that you are not comfortable with the topic.
- If you don't know an answer to a question your teen asks, say so. No one knows all the answers about sex.
- Listen to yourself as well as to your children. When you talk to your teen, are you telling him/her your values or what you think is most important about sexuality?
- You and your child may disagree. Try to talk about a topic, not argue.

Tips for parents

What can parents do? We hope you've been able to talk with your children about sexuality as they've been growing up. If not, start now. It's never too late! In her book, *Straight From the Heart*, Carol Cassel offers the following hints for getting started:

Seize the moment.

While doing a job together, or watching TV, talk to your child about a sexuality issue. Choose a night, choose a TV program, and watch with your child. Many of the TV scenes can lead into a good talk about sexuality.

Be alert to moments to teach.

As your teen's body is changing, use this chance to discuss the subject. An easy opener could be, "You are really growing up. One of the experiences you may soon have, or already have had, is...."

Get to the point.

Answer your teenagers' questions without boring them or jumping to conclusions. Don't accuse them of having sex just because they ask a question; they may only be curious. If you don't know an answer, say so. Offer to find out for them. Buy them their own book on teenage sexuality. Talk with them about the books.

Honor their privacy.

What your teen tells you should remain confidential. Don't tell your friends or relatives what your teen has told you.

Discuss, don't dictate.

You can talk about what you think is important while respecting your child's view. Ask questions to make your teen think. When a boy and girl have intercourse, what does the girl think about the relationship? What about the boy? What could he be thinking?

Be aware of your own values, beliefs, ideas, and fears.

Thinking about what matters most to you is the first step towards being able to share your own beliefs and concerns with your teen.

Source: Whose Kids?...Our Kids! Teen Assessment Project. University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension.

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