



TIPS FOR PARENTS

Talking with Your Preteen about Sex and Relationships



At this Age: 9–12 Years Old

At this age, your child will probably start puberty. Puberty brings on a load of hormones and changes for your child, which may make them feel uncomfortable. During this stage, make sure they know you are there for them. They might start acting like they don't care about you, but they really do need you.

With all of the new hormones, they may also start thinking about relationships and sexuality. There is a lot to learn!



body changes that are specific to girls or boys, there are others that happen to everyone. It is also important to teach your preteen that puberty causes their sweat glands to produce more sweat, so personal hygiene is important.

FEMALES

- Growth spurt
- Breasts may get bigger
- Grow pubic and underarm hair
- Hips may widen
- Start menstruation (period), which will cause bleeding every month
- Sweat glands become more active and produce more sweat

MALES

- Growth spurt
- Voice may crack and get deeper
- Testes and penis will get bigger
- Grow pubic, underarm, and possibly facial hair
- Might have “wet dreams” (ejaculation in sleep)
- Sweat glands become more active and produce more sweat



What Should I Teach?

Puberty

Children typically begin puberty between 8 and 14 years old. Start talking about puberty and what that may look like for your child. When children know the facts, they are more prepared, and it becomes less awkward and scary. Talking to children early in their development will help set a strong foundation for having these conversations.

Don't be afraid to teach your child what puberty looks like for boys and girls. While there are some

Positive versus negative relationships

Later in this stage for your child, they might start thinking about dating. The rules of dating are totally up to you as a family to agree on. Your child might start being interested soon, and it is important to teach them what a healthy relationship looks like.

In healthy relationships, both partners are

- loving
- understanding
- respectful
- caring

Begin to explain sexism and stereotypes of each gender. These are not part of a healthy relationship. When watching television together, point out good and bad behaviors of the relationships in the shows. This will help you talk about it more comfortably.

Sex

At this age, your child may start being curious about what sex is. This is natural. It does not mean that they want to start having sex. Your child will find out about sex. It could be from you or one of their friends. Make sure you are the one who gives them the facts.

When talking about sex at this age, you do not need to give them all the details. Keep it simple. Listen to their questions. If they are brave enough to ask it, then you need to answer it honestly.

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Protection and STIs

When talking about the basics of sex, start to teach about contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). They need to know that, when two bodies come together, there can be consequences.

For more information, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s comprehensive list of protective methods: <https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/contraception/index.htm>.

Let them know that there are also diseases people can get when they do not use protective methods. Some STIs can be cured with medical help. Others cannot be cured, but the symptoms can be treated. It is important to teach children to recognize what healthy sexual body parts look like so that they can identify any symptoms of STIs or other illnesses they may develop.

Let them know that the only 100 percent effective way to prevent pregnancy or STIs is abstinence, which is not having sex at all.

Internet Safety

Continue talking about internet safety. Set limits for how long they can be on their computer or phone.



Be honest about the limits you have set for them and tell them why. Children feel better when they understand there is a reason for the limits.

If your child has viewed pornography, it is important for you to talk to them about it. It will probably feel awkward, but they need to hear from you. Teach them that relationships and sex do not typically look like what they may have seen in pornography, just like how the real world is not the same as what they see on TV or the internet.

Emphasize that healthy sexuality has limits and that, while sexual expression and exploration is normal, it must be balanced with respect for and safety of ourselves and others. Also, if you feel too uncomfortable or think your preteen will feel too uncomfortable talking to you about this, it is okay for them to talk to another adult who you trust. Many preteens can benefit from talking to their coaches, family friends, extended family, or other trusted adults.

Talk a little bit about sexting, which includes sending naked pictures to people. Near the end of this stage in your child’s life, other people might pressure them to send pictures. Emphasize that they can’t control who sees those pictures once they’ve been shared. Teach them that choosing not to send these kinds of pictures is the surest way to keep their photos private.

Consent

Talk to your child about saying no. If someone is pressuring them to do anything uncomfortable, then they are not real friends. Talk to your child about consent, which means giving permission. Help them understand that their body is their own, and they never have to do anything they don’t want to or don’t feel comfortable with.

Just as your child's body is their own, other people have ownership of their bodies, too. It is extremely important for your child to understand this. You can practice consent with your child by asking them for a hug or high-five and waiting for a response. Showing them that you respect their boundaries helps them understand how to respect other people's boundaries.



How Do I Teach That?

When

This conversation should be ongoing, meaning it should happen more than once. You can naturally bring up the conversation while watching television shows or movies. Most shows and movies have people in relationships. You can also talk about it if a family member or neighbor becomes pregnant. Your child at this age might even bring up the topic on their own.

Where

If you feel uncomfortable talking about this, then it might help to bring it up when driving in the car. When you are in the car, you are both looking forward or out of a window. This might help you feel less awkward since you don't have to look at each other. You could also talk in your child's bedroom or another place they feel comfortable. Just make sure you are somewhere private, so they don't get too embarrassed. This kind of conversation is not one to have at the dinner table, or even when other siblings are present.

How

Your preteen probably will feel too awkward to bring up the conversation. You can invite your child to ask questions by simply saying, "I am here for you and open to talk about whatever you would like." Speak calmly. It is important that you don't make it sound like a big deal. If you talk to them like it is normal, you will both feel more comfortable.

They will also feel better about asking questions if they know you won't shut them down. If they do ask a question, make sure to answer honestly. It is perfectly fine if you do not have an answer for their questions. Tell them you will look into it and come back to them—and make sure you actually follow

through. This will help build trust between you and your preteen.



Great Books for Your Child

Getting books for your child to read on their own is a great way to start a conversation. If they read about it by themselves, they might feel better about coming to you with questions. Below are great books for your preteen.

It's So Amazing! A Book about Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Family by Robie H. Harris

This is a great book to read with your child at the beginning of this stage (around age 9). It will help you explain how babies are made and what the reproductive parts do.

Growing Up Great! The Ultimate Puberty Book for Boys by Scott Todnem

This book is a great resource for your preteen boy. It will tell him all about what to expect in puberty, and it was written by a school health teacher.

The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book for Younger Girls by Valerie Schaefer

This is a great book for your preteen girl. It teaches her to be comfortable with her body, all about having a period, and about wearing bras.

Let's Talk about Boundaries, Consent, and Respect by Jayneen Sanders

This is a great book to help you teach your child about healthy relationships, how to respect others, and how to say no.

What's Happening to My Body? Book for Girls by Lynda Madaras

This book covers just about everything for your daughter. She can learn the science behind her menstrual cycle, how to keep her body healthy, and so much more.

What's Happening to My Body? Book for Boys by Lynda Madaras

This book will help guide your preteen boy through the changes he experiences during puberty. He will also learn about romantic feelings and keeping himself healthy.

Resources

Center for Young Women's Health. (2018, March 29). *Talking to your tween about sexuality: A guide for parents*. Young Women's Health. <https://youngwomenshealth.org/parents/talking-to-your-tween-about-sexuality/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, April 22). *Reproductive health*. <https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/contraception/index.htm>

Dowshen, S. (2015, June). *Understanding puberty*. Kids Health. <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/understanding-puberty.html>

Sick Kids Staff. (2019, June 6). *Sexuality: What children should learn and when*. About Kids Health. <https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/Article?contentid=716&language=English>

Visit tips.extension.msstate.edu for additional parenting resources.

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