



TIPS FOR PARENTS

Talking with Your Teen about Sex and Relationships



At this Age: 13–18 Years Old

The teenage years of your child’s life are going to bring an entirely new set of challenges, surprises, and joys. The teen years can be foundational for your child. As your child learns to make their own decisions, they are learning who they want to be. These decisions and lifestyle choices could be carried into their adult life.

Remember, talking about sex with your teen won’t make them more likely to have sex. It is normal for your child to be curious about sex. They will seek out the information from their peers, social media, or the internet, and they are

“[Teens] will seek out the information from their peers, social media, or the internet, and they are unlikely to get accurate information from these sources. Making sure they have the facts and are knowledgeable about sex helps keep them safe.”

unlikely to get accurate information from these sources.

Making sure they have the facts and are knowledgeable about sex helps keep them safe. Teens who learn about sex from nurturing parents are less likely to be sexually active. Also, research has shown us that teens actually want their parents to talk to them about sex. You can do it!



What Should I Teach?

Romantic relationships

Teach your child about romantic relationships and how to love others. The dating rules are up to you as a family to agree on, but it is always a good idea to teach your child about healthy and unhealthy romantic relationships. Knowledge about romantic relationships will help prepare your teen and keep them safe.

Ask your teen what they think a healthy relationship looks like. Talk to them about that, asking what they would want in a relationship and why. Healthy romantic relationships involve love, sacrifice, friendship, commitment, and joint problem-solving. Remind them, though, that even healthy relationships have problems. They need to know what problems are normal and which are unhealthy or dangerous.



Listed below are dangers in an unhealthy romantic relationship. When your teen knows what an unhealthy relationship looks like, they are more likely to be safe in a relationship.

- **Dating violence:** Any harm felt in a romantic relationship. This harm can be emotional, physical, mental, or sexual.
- **Pressure:** When anyone pressures you to do something you feel is wrong or you are not ready for.
- **Harassment:** When someone intimidates you or aggressively pressures you.
- **Misogyny:** Prejudice or dislike of women; stereotypes of women are misogynistic.

Be assertive and upstanding

Talk about the dangers of pressure. At this age, your child could be pressured by others to have sex or do things they don't want to do. It is so important that you teach your teens how to stand up for themselves. **Assertiveness** is a valuable tool. When teens can speak up and stand up for themselves, they can protect themselves. In order to become assertive, teens need to know their worth. You can help them become assertive by

- encouraging them to go after their dreams.
- supporting them in their hobbies or activities, such as art, music, or sports.
- reminding them how much you care for and love them.
- being an example—if they see that you are assertive, they will be more likely to follow your lead.

It is also important that you teach your child to be **upstanding**. This means they are willing to help and stand up for their peers who are being harassed or bullied. Talk to your teen about different situations and ask them what they would do. It is helpful for you and your teen to think about different ways they can stand up for others before a time comes when they actually need to.



Talk more about sex

There are a lot of important things your teen needs to know about sex. And remember, just because they are learning about sex does not mean they are having sex. The more knowledge they have, the healthier choices they will make.

Now that your child is a teenager, they need to learn what safe sex looks like. Safer sex involves a lot of different things, but it all comes down to the same idea—staying safe. If your teen decides to engage in sexual activities, it is important for them to know the following to reduce risk:

- Abstinence is the safest option to eliminate risk.
- Talk to a new partner about their sexual past before having sex.
- Avoid taking drugs or drinking because it inhibits your ability to make rational choices, including your ability to understand consent.
- Use a condom or barrier method every time you have sex.
- Know that every additional sexual partner increases your risk.
- Don't have sex if you or your partner have sores, bumps, or a rash around your genitals, or discharge. If these symptoms arise, it is important to see a doctor.

Also a part of safer sex, **consent** basically means giving permission. Consent cannot be given when a person is taking drugs or drinking alcohol. It also cannot be given when someone is unconscious. Consent needs to be given verbally—the person has to say “yes” out loud.

Remind your teen that the only way to avoid unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections is abstinence. **Abstinence** means not having sex. Having sex at an early age is risky, so it is important for your teen to know that abstinence is a choice.

Continue talking about pregnancy and STIs

Start talking with your teen about what pregnancy and having a child looks like. Ask your teenager what they think would change if they were to have an unplanned pregnancy. Make sure they know what your expectations of them would be if this happened.

You should also begin to teach more in depth about sexually transmitted infections. Explain how the most common STIs, chlamydia and gonorrhea, usually don't show symptoms. But if these infections don't get treated, they could be damaging and make it almost impossible for a woman to get pregnant. There are also STIs that cannot be cured, like herpes, and others that can be fatal, like HIV.

Make sure your teen knows that sex can lead to serious consequences. Teenagers are still developing. They often have the mentality that they are invincible, or the idea that “it will never happen to me.” This can lead to risky behaviors. This is why it is important for you to talk to them about the risks.



How Do I Teach That?

When

It is best to start talking about sexuality when your kids are young. However, if you are just starting, that is great, too! It is better to talk to your child about sex now than never. If this is the first time you have brought up this topic, however, your teenager will probably feel uncomfortable. Make sure to let them know that while you have never talked to them about this, you are changing and you are here for them. Just knowing that you are willing to talk to them will help them feel better.

A great time to talk is when you are watching television together. Shows and movies usually have sexuality and relationships in them, so it can give you a chance to ask them what they think.

You should talk to your teen several times about sex and relationships. As their parent or guardian, you know your child best. Change the topic in your sexuality discussions based on the actions and behaviors you see in your teen.

Where

If you feel a little uncomfortable talking about sex and relationships with your teenager, a great place to start is in the car. If you are riding in the car together and have some time on your drive, bring up the conversation. You are both sitting forward and not looking at each other, so it might feel easier to talk. You can also talk in your home wherever your teen feels comfortable, like their bedroom or the living room.



How

When talking to your teen, try to remember what it felt like to be that age. Teenagers have big emotions. It's important that you don't make them feel like their emotions don't matter. To them, what is happening in their life and what they feel is their entire world. Don't be afraid to open up about yourself. If you talk about your own experiences and challenges, your teen might be more willing to listen and even ask questions.

When talking about sex and relationships, it is important that you listen to what your teen has to say. If they feel like they can talk to you, they will be more willing to listen to what you have to say.

It can be uncomfortable talking to your teen about sex and relationships. However, it would be so much more uncomfortable having to discuss next steps for a pregnancy or having to take your child to the hospital for a sexually transmitted infection. These discussions can help keep your teen safe.



Great Books for Your Teen

Because these discussions can be challenging and uncomfortable, it is a good idea to provide your teen with books they can read on their own. When reading on their own, your teen might feel more comfortable coming to you with questions. It is also helpful when you know what is in the book, so you have guidance on what to talk about with your teen.

Consent. The New Rules of Sex Education by Jennifer Lang

This book is written by a doctor and is a great source of information for your teen. It will teach your teen different aspects of a healthy relationship and the need for consent.

Being a Teen by Jane Fonda

This book provides your teen with information on almost everything about sexuality, from body changes to relationships.

Embracing the Awkward by Joshua Rodriguez

This is a great book to help your teen build confidence and feel good in their own skin.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014, May 22). *CDC fact sheet: Information for teens and young adults: Staying healthy and preventing STDs*. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/life-stages-populations/stdfact-teens.htm>

Ginsburg, K. R., & Kinsman, S. B. (2013, October 29). *Talking to your child about sex*. Healthy Children. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/puberty/Pages/Talking-to-Your-Child-About-Sex.aspx>

Guilamo-Ramos, V. (2018, October 24). *How parents shape teens' sexual decision-making for the better*. Power to Decide. <https://powertodecide.org/news/how-parents-shape-teens-sexual-decision-making-for-better>

Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2018, October). *For families: 6 tips for reducing and preventing misogyny and sexual harassment among teens and young adults*. Making Caring Common Project. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-families/6-tips-parents-reducing-preventing-misogyny-sexual-harassment>

Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2018, October). *For families: 5 tips for guiding teens and young adults in developing healthy romantic relationships*. Making Caring Common Project. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-families/5-tips-parents-guiding-teens-healthy-romantic-relationships>

Healthwise Staff. (2019, August 21). *How adolescent thinking develops*. Michigan Medicine, University of Michigan. <https://www.uofmhealth.org/health-library/te7261>

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.

PUBLICATION 3598 (06-21)

BY **AMANDA HAYES**, TIPPS STUDENT INTERN; **IZZY PELLEGRINE**, MS, TIPPS PROJECT MANAGER; **ALISHA M. HARDMAN**, PHD, CFLE, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AND EXTENSION FAMILY LIFE SPECIALIST; AND **LORI ELMORE-STATON**, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, HUMAN SCIENCES.

COPYRIGHT 2021 BY MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. THIS PUBLICATION MAY BE COPIED AND DISTRIBUTED WITHOUT ALTERATION FOR NONPROFIT EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES PROVIDED THAT CREDIT IS GIVEN TO THE MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION SERVICE.

PRODUCED BY AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS.

MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY IS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY INSTITUTION. DISCRIMINATION IN UNIVERSITY EMPLOYMENT, PROGRAMS, OR ACTIVITIES BASED ON RACE, COLOR, ETHNICITY, SEX, PREGNANCY, RELIGION, NATIONAL ORIGIN, DISABILITY, AGE, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENETIC INFORMATION, STATUS AS A U.S. VETERAN, OR ANY OTHER STATUS PROTECTED BY APPLICABLE LAW IS PROHIBITED.

EXTENSION SERVICE OF MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY, COOPERATING WITH U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE. PUBLISHED IN FURTHERANCE OF ACTS OF CONGRESS, MAY 8 AND JUNE 30, 1914. GARY B. JACKSON, DIRECTOR