

Let's Talk: Sexual Health

Many parents feel nervous and uncomfortable about discussing sexual health with their children. There's also a common misperception that talking about sex will encourage teenagers to start having intercourse. However, studies show that informed children and teenagers tend to grow up with healthier perceptions of sex and to engage in healthier partner relationships.

Some commonly asked questions and suggestions for engaging in open communication about sex are:

Why should we talk about sex?

- teens can be misinformed about sex, and it's a good idea to help them sort through what is correct and what is not
- misinformation about sex puts kids at risk – for unplanned pregnancy, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and/or sexual exploitation
- your teen may have questions but feels “dumb,” “uncool,” or afraid to ask
- there is a perception that most kids “already know” – kids who feel “behind” may suffer from low self-esteem and feel less confident about themselves
- communication can strengthen your relationship with your teen – talking openly demonstrates interest, concern, and support for your teen

When should I have the conversation with my teen?

- it is never too early or too late to discuss sex with your children – there is an appropriate topic about sexual health for children of *all ages*

What topics should I cover?

- birth control
- pregnancy and how a baby would change your family's life
- healthy relationships, dating, love
- physical changes in the body
- sexually transmitted infections (STIs) – how they are transmitted and their lasting effects

- any other issues of concern to your teen – refusing to answer questions or avoiding certain topics could lead to your teen feeling “judged” and/or feeling like they are unacceptable in some way

How do I have the conversation?

- be age-appropriate – kids of different ages are concerned with different topics – younger children tend to be interested in issues concerning puberty and their changing bodies; older children tend to be curious about sexual relationships
- keep in mind that all kids develop at different speeds and try to gauge which topics are of interest to and appropriate for your child
- be empathic – try to remember what it was like when you were a teenager, the types of questions you had, and things you were curious about
- avoid being judgmental and try not to lecture
- discuss family values; be prepared to be questioned or challenged about those values
- be prepared – it’s a great idea to research sexual topics and/or to practice having the conversation ahead of time
- remember to address issues of EMOTIONAL well-being in addition to PHYSICAL well-being in sexual relationships
- avoid making assumptions about your child’s sexual identity
- be aware that “coming out” can be difficult and teens need to feel safe and supported by family and loved ones
- demonstrate respect for sexuality by using proper names and adjectives
- refrain from making jokes to gloss over topics as this will send signals to your teen about what you are comfortable with

Things to be aware of:

- avoiding the topic of sexual health could create an “aura of intrigue” about sex and create unrealistic and/or false impressions of sexuality
- be aware of how *you* are feeling and work within your own comfort zone – sharing a book, a website, a DVD with your teen are good ways to “break the ice” or to get the conversation moving if you’re feeling “stalled”
- be aware that talking about sex doesn’t have to be “all or nothing” – consider what is age appropriate and relevant at this point in your child’s life – after your discussion, refrain from inserting casual remarks about sexuality into everyday conversation so that kids

recognize that the topic of sexual health needs to be treated respectfully

Resources

- The New Speaking of Sex: What Your Children Need to Know and When They Need to Know It, by Meg Hickling
- What's Happening to Me? : An Illustrated Guide to Puberty, by Peter Mayle
- Changing Bodies, Changing Lives: Expanded Third Edition: A Book for Teens on Sex and Relationships, by Ruth Bell
- The Six Most Important Decisions You'll Ever Make, by Sean Covey
- <http://www.saleemanoon.com/>
- www.wontgetweird.com
- www.optbc.org
- <http://www.pflagvancouver.com/>
- <http://www.galebc.org/>
- www.lgtbcentrevancouver.com/