

Ten Tips for Parents

on how to talk to your pre-teens and teens

"If parents do not discuss sex with their children and teens...then the media will pick up the slack. Good communication can yield rich dividends, but it takes time and effort

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The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (www.thenationalcampaign.org) has reviewed recent research about parental influences on children's sexual behavior and talked to many experts in the field, as well as to teens and parents themselves. From these sources, it is clear that there is much parents and adults can do to reduce the risk of kids becoming pregnant before they've grown up.

1. Be clear about your own sexual values and attitudes

Communicating with your children about sex, love, and relationships is often more successful when you are certain in your own mind about these issues. To help clarify your attitudes and values, think about the following kinds of questions:

- *What do you really think about school-aged teenagers being sexually active – perhaps even becoming parents?*
- *Who is responsible for setting sexual limits in a relationship and how is that done, realistically?*
- *Were you sexually active as a teenager and how do you feel about that now?*
- *Were you sexually active before you were married? What do such reflections lead you to say to your own children about these issues?*
- *What do you think about encouraging teenagers to abstain from sex?*
- *What do you think about teenagers using contraception?*

2. Talk with your children early and often about sex, and be specific

Kids have lots of questions about sex, and they often say that the source they'd most like to go to for answers is their parents.

- Start the conversations, and make sure that they are honest, open, and respectful.
- If you can't think of how to start the discussion, consider using situations shown on television or in movies as conversation starters.
- Tell them candidly and confidently what you think and why you take these positions.
- Be sure to have a *two-way conversation, not a one-way lecture!*
- *Ask them what they think* and what they know so you can correct misconceptions
- Ask what, if anything, worries them.

Age-appropriate conversations about relationships and intimacy should begin early in a child's life and continue through adolescence. Resist the idea that there should be just one conversation about all this – you know, "the talk." The truth is that parents and kids should be talking about sex and love all along. This applies to both sons and daughters and to both mothers and fathers.

Tell them about love and sex, and what the difference is. Talk about the reasons that kids (and adults) find sex interesting and enticing. If you discuss only the "downsides" of unplanned pregnancy and disease, you will miss many of the issues on teenagers' minds (such as those on the next page).

Here are the kinds of questions kids say they want to discuss:

- *How do I know if I'm in love?*
- *Will sex bring me closer to my girlfriend/boyfriend?*
- *How will I know when I'm ready to have sex? Should I wait until marriage?*
- *Will having sex make me popular? Will it make me more grown-up?*
- *How do I tell my boyfriend that I don't want to have sex without losing him or hurting his feelings?*
- *How do I manage pressure from my girlfriend to have sex?*
How does contraception work? Are some methods better than others? Are they safe?
- *Can you get pregnant the first time?*

In addition to being an "askable parent," be a parent with a point of view. Tell your children what you think. Don't be reluctant to say, for example (*but substitute your own beliefs*):

- *I think kids in high school are too young to have sex, especially because it's so risky nowadays.*
- *Our family's religion says that sex should be an expression of love within marriage. Finding yourself in a sexually charged situation is not unusual; you need to think about how you'll handle it in advance.*
- *Have a plan. Will you say "no"? Will you use contraception? How will you talk about all this with your partner?*
- *It's okay to think about sex and to feel sexual desire. Everybody does! But it's not okay to get pregnant/get somebody pregnant as a teenager.*
- *Whenever you do have sex, always use protection against pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases until you are ready to have a child.*
- *One of the many reasons I'm concerned about teens drinking or using drugs is that it often leads to unprotected sex.*
- *(For boys) Having a baby doesn't make you a man. Being able to wait and acting responsibly does.*
- *(For girls) You don't have to have sex to keep a boyfriend. If sex is the price of a close relationship, find someone else.*

By the way, research has shown again and again that talking with your children about sex does not encourage them to become sexually active.

3. Supervise and monitor your children and adolescents

- Establish rules, curfews, and standards of expected behavior, preferably through an open process of family discussion and respectful communication.
- If your children get out of school at 3 p.m. and you don't get home from work until 6 p.m., who is responsible for making certain that your children are not only safe during those hours, but also are engaged in useful activities?

- Where are they when they go out with friends? Are there adults around who are in charge? Supervising and monitoring your kids' whereabouts doesn't make you a nag; it makes you a parent.

4. Know your children's friends and their families

- Friends have a strong influence on each other, so help your children and teenagers become friends with kids whose families share your values.
- Arrange to meet with the parents of your children's friends to establish common rules and expectations.
- Welcome your children's friends into your home and talk to them openly.

5. Discourage early, frequent, and steady dating

Group activities among young people are fine and often fun, but allowing teens to begin steady, one-on-one dating much before age 16 can lead to trouble. Let your child know about your strong feelings about this throughout childhood – don't wait until your young teen proposes a plan that differs from your preferences in this area; otherwise, he or she will think you just don't like the particular person or invitation.

6. Take a strong stand against your daughter dating a boy significantly older than she is

And don't allow your son to develop an intense relationship with a girl much younger than he is. Older guys can seem glamorous to a young girl – sometimes they even have money and a car to boot! But the risk of matters getting out of hand increases when the guy is much older than the girl. Try setting a limit of no more than a two- (or at most three-) year age difference. The power differences between younger girls and older boys or men can lead girls into risky situations, including unwanted sex and sex with no protection.

7. Help your teenagers to have options for the future that are more attractive than early pregnancy and parenthood. The chances that your children will delay sex, pregnancy, and parenthood are significantly increased if their futures appears bright. This means helping them set meaningful goals for the future, talking to them about what it takes to make future plans come true, and helping them reach their goals

8. Let your kids know that you value education highly

Encourage your children to take school seriously and set high expectations about their school performance. School failure is often the first sign of trouble that can end in teenage parenthood. Be very attentive to your children's progress in school and intervene 'early if things aren't going well.

9. Know what your kids are watching, reading, and listening to

The media (television, radio, movies, music videos, magazines, video games, the Internet) are chock full of material sending the wrong messages. The sex act rarely has meaning, disease or unplanned

pregnancy seldom happens, nobody seems to use contraception or condoms, and few people having sex ever seem to be married or even especially committed to anyone. Websites with explicit photographs of everything imaginable are easily accessible to children.

Is this consistent with your expectations and values? If not, it is important to talk with your children about what the media portray and what you think about it. Use family media usage (watching TV together, listening to music in the car, coming home from a movie) as a way to start conversations about sex and sexuality. If certain programs or movies offend you, *say so*, and explain why. But don't just be negative, or kids will just tune you out. Be sure to also comment when you see situations that show responsible behavior and good choices. Be "media literate" – *think* about what you and your family are watching and reading, and the messages that are conveyed. Encourage your kids to think critically: ask them what *they* think about the programs they watch and the music they listen to. Why are the messages what they are? Do your kids agree with them?

Not allowing a TV or computer in your children's bedrooms (the advice given by virtually all child development professionals and children's advocates) is the single most important step you can take in protecting them from material inappropriate for their age. You can control the available media in the rest of the house: turn the TV off (or program your set's V-Chip or Parental Control feature), cancel subscriptions, place certain movies off limits and activate Parental Control features on your home computer system. (All of this gets harder as your kids get older.) You will never be able to fully control what your children see and hear, so **controlling access to media is never the complete answer** – you still have to talk with your children.

10. These first nine tips for helping your child avoid teen pregnancy work best when they occur as part of strong, close relationships with your children

that are built from an early age. Strive for a relationship that is warm in tone, firm in discipline, and rich in communication, and one that emphasizes mutual trust and respect. There is no single way to create such relationships, but the following habits of the heart can help:

- Express love and affection clearly and often.
- Praise specific accomplishments, but remember that expressions of affection should be offered freely, not just for a particular achievement.
- Listen carefully to what your children say and pay thoughtful attention to what they do.
- Spend time with your children engaged in activities that suit their ages and interests, not just yours.
- Be supportive and be interested in what interests them. Attend their sports events; learn about their hobbies; be enthusiastic about their achievements, even the little ones; ask them questions that show you care and want to know what is going on in their lives.
- Be courteous and respectful to your children and avoid hurtful teasing or ridicule.
- Don't compare your teenager with other family members (i.e., why can't you be like your older sister?).
- Show that you expect courtesy and respect from them in return.
- Have meals together as a family as often as possible, and use the time for conversation, not confrontation.

Adapted from materials by National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy
www.thenationalcampaign.org