

Talking to Your Young Teen about Sex and Sexuality

Guidelines for Parents from the American Academy of Pediatrics

Sex seems to be everywhere these days -- on television, in the movies, and in popular songs. Sex in the media is so common that you might think that your young teenager already knows everything he or she needs to know about sex. In fact, your teenager may claim that he or she already knows everything about sex, but this is not true. Teens today need information about sex more than ever, and parents are still the best source for that information. The American Academy of Pediatrics offers the following tips to help you talk to your teen about this important and sensitive subject.

Why should I talk to my teen about sex?

Talks about sex should begin when your child first asks a question like “where do babies come from?” Children usually start asking such questions at age 3 or 4. Waiting until your child is a teenager to have “the big talk” means your child will probably learn his first lessons about sex from someone other than you. Studies show that children who learn about sex from friends instead of their parents are more likely to have sex before marriage. They are also more likely to have sex at a young age, and to have more than one sexual partner before marriage. You can have a great effect on your child by talking about sex even at a young age.

Television and sex.

Television exposes children and teens to adult behaviors by showing these actions as being normal and riskfree. Being sexually active is often shown on TV as a popular thing to do. Because sexual activity happens so often on TV, the message that is sent is “everybody does it”, with no harmful results. In addition, young teens may think that these behaviors will make them more grown-up. Ten percent of adolescent girls in the United States get pregnant each year. Although TV viewing is not the only way that your teen learns about sexuality, the risks and results of sexual activity are not given equal time on TV. Programs on many cable TV channels are often even more extreme in the way they portray sex. This makes it even more important for you to talk about these issues with your young teen.

What should I tell my teen about sex?

Well before they reach their early teens, both boys and girls should already know: The basics of sexual “plumbing”, that is, the names and functions of male and female sex organs; the purpose and meaning of puberty (moving into young womanhood or young manhood); the function of the menstrual cycle (period); what sexual intercourse is and how women become pregnant.

About the fourth grade year

We recommend a book titled *Where Did I Come From?* by Peter Mayle. It is presented in cartoon form, is totally non-threatening, and gives the full facts about sex and the growth of a baby. It is a great book to read together with your 9 or 10 year old. A good sequel is *What’s Happening to Me?* Also by Peter Mayle, which is recommended for fifth graders. It tells about puberty, the changes that normally occur at this age and is especially valuable because it tells about the changes that occur in both boys and girls.

Once your child becomes a teenager.

The focus of your talks about sex should shift. You should begin to talk to your teen about the social and emotional aspects of sex, and about your values. You will want to deal with issues that help your teenager answer questions like these: “When should I start dating?” “When is it okay to kiss a boy (or a girl)?” “How far is too far?” “How will I know when I’m ready to have sex?” “Won’t having sex help me keep my boyfriend (or girlfriend)?”

You should answer your teen's questions based on your own value system -- even if you think your values are old-fashioned by today's standards. If you feel strongly that sex before marriage is wrong, you should tell your teenager that. But be sure to explain why you feel that way. If you explain the reasons for your beliefs, your teen is more likely to understand and adopt your values. You also need to listen to what your teenager is saying. Find out what she knows about sex and try to answer her questions as clearly and directly as possible.