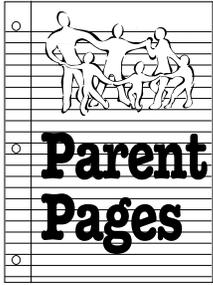


Talking to Your Pre-Teen about Sex



Talking with your maturing children about sex gives you the opportunity to teach them how to make responsible decisions about their own sexual activity. Studies show that teenagers who talk with their parents about sex are more likely to postpone sexual activity and to use contraception when they do begin.

The main reason you should talk to your child about sex is that sex is an intimate subject involving family values, feelings and communication. No one is in a better position than you are to help your child make wise choices in this personal area.

Even if you have never before spoken with your preteen or teen about sex, it's not too late to begin. If your child does not ask questions, then you should initiate conversations about sex.

It usually takes practice to become comfortable talking about sex. Rehearse what you'll say with your mate or a good friend. Admit to your children that talking about sex isn't easy for you. You might say, "I wish I had talked with you about sex when you were younger. My parents never spoke about it with me and I wish they had." Don't let discomfort keep you silent.

It isn't necessary to be an expert on sex to talk with your children. If you don't know the answer to a question, say, "Let's look it up together." Show that you are willing to discuss whatever questions your children have.

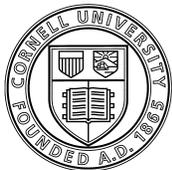
One way to begin a conversation about puberty is to mention that you've seen the first signs of puberty in your child (or your child's friends) - darkening facial hair or developing breasts. You might say, "This means you are becoming an adult." Use this as an opportunity to point out other changes they can anticipate.

Present a positive and reassuring view of puberty. Many parents find it helpful to share books about puberty with their children. Ask for recommendations from a school counselor or your religious leader. Share funny or embarrassing anecdotes from your own experience - the first time you asked someone out on a date or how worried you were about your own development.

Listen to your children. When you give your teens your full attention, you show that you respect their thoughts and feelings. Listening carefully also gives you an opportunity to spot misinformation that needs to be cleared up.



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Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
Orange County

Community Campus
18 Seward Avenue, Suite 300
Middletown, NY 10940-1919
845-344-1234
www.cce.cornell.edu/orange
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As you listen, be sensitive to unasked questions. For example, when your daughter complains that her best friend's only interest these days is boys, she may be asking for reassurance that her own lack of interest in boys is okay. Since teens vary enormously in their readiness for social and sexual relationships, they need to know that it is normal to be boy - or girl-crazy during the teens, and normal not to be, too.

Respect your children's privacy. Many preteens and teens are afraid their parents will discuss what they say with others.

Show that you trust your child by not jumping to conclusions. Many teens say that they are afraid to ask their parents questions for fear of being wrongly accused. For example, when your children ask about birth control, this does not mean they are having intercourse or even contemplating it. Answer directly and include a simple statement of your family's values concerning birth control. Remember that making decisions about sex can be very difficult. Stress "If you want to talk about it, we're here to help."

Preteens, ages 9 to 12, need straightforward information about the physical and emotional changes to expect during puberty. Since parents must know or learn the facts, prepare yourself by reading books intended for your child's age group. Then prepare your growing pre-adolescent for making decisions about sexual activity by offering solid information about the realities and consequences of sexual activity.

According to experts, you should cover these topics in the preteen and teen years:

- ◆ reproductive systems in both sexes
- ◆ sexual intercourse, including oral sex
- ◆ fertility and birth control
- ◆ masturbation
- ◆ forms of sexual behavior besides intercourse, such as necking, petting and mutual masturbation
- ◆ the differences in sexual urges of boys and girls
- ◆ possible negative physical and emotional consequences of sexual intercourse; sexually transmitted disease (STD); unwanted pregnancy; the blow to self-esteem that may occur when a sexual relationship ends
- ◆ sexual orientation

When should you talk to your preteen or teen about sex? At every opportunity. Like other important lessons such as learning to manage time or money, sex education is a continuing process. One conversation isn't enough. But be sure to talk to your child well before the onset of puberty. Many sex educators recommend telling children no later than age 10 about menstruation and nocturnal emissions (wet dreams).

Avoid making sex education for girls a "mother's job" or insisting that sons "talk to your father." Parents should talk to each other about their views of sex roles and sexual values. In an ideal world, parents' views would coincide, but in the real world there are often disagreements. By discussing differences with each other, parents can decide how to handle them in an open way with their children.

Look for opportunities to discuss sexual roles and attitudes with your preteens and teens. Talk about TV shows, ads, newspaper articles, celebrity lifestyles and friends' experiences.

Find out when your child's school is offering sex education courses. Review materials and films that your child will see. Use them as a starting point to talk about family values. Ask, "Did you think the film you saw today was helpful?" Or, "Do you think most of the kids in the class had questions the film didn't answer?"

Above all, let your children know that sexuality is an important part of life. Tell them that they will continue to learn about it, and their feelings about sexuality will mature and change throughout life.

*Source: The National PTA. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension Suffolk County.*