

Talking with teens about sexuality

Raising Teens

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Teens' Voices

“When I try to talk to my parents about sex, they just joke around about it.”
“My mom gives the vibe that she doesn’t care but when something happens, she gets mad.”
“I don’t talk to my parents about sex because they jump to conclusions that something is wrong.” --- *Skowhegan High School students.*

“What do you mean by ‘sex’?”

The sexual context of growing up is different for our teens than it was when we were young. Most young people define “sex” as intercourse. All other kinds of sexual behavior is “not actual sex” or “just fooling around.” Teens often think of these experiences as minor pastimes of some meaningless, frivolous or less real nature.

Does this imply that our teens can participate in these behaviors without having to take any kind of personal responsibility? That these behaviors don’t count? Questions of morality don’t apply?

This isn’t the message we want to give our teens. First, there are the very real dangers of sexually transmitted diseases from sexual acts that aren’t actual intercourse. Second, there are significant emotional dangers in any sexual behavior. Teens can feel exploited, out-of-control, belittled, and even broken-hearted from these very real sexual experiences. All sexual behaviors by people of any age need to be carefully chosen with consideration of physical, emotional and ethical consequences.

Obviously, when we talk to our teens about “sex” we need to make sure they know we mean all sexual behaviors.

Preparing for the conversation

The anxiety we feel about talking to our teens about sexuality is a sign that we need to look inward. This is where we should start – by exploring our moral values, religious beliefs, views on controversial sexual and reproductive issues, personal experiences and “lessons learned”, and our responsibilities as parents. We should share our “findings” with our spouse or partner and other adults who love our children. We can talk over our ideas with school counselors, clergy, and other parents.

Beginning the conversation

Here are some examples of ways to begin the conversation with our teens about sexuality. We want to communicate our motives (caring, safety) and our values:

“You know, we’ve never really talked with you about sex, and although it’s uncomfortable for me to bring it up after all this time, and probably for you, too, I’ve come to realize how important it is for us to talk.”

“We care about what happens to you and want to help you find ways to stay in control of your body and your life. Giving into sexual pressure might make you feel like you’ve let yourself down.”

“We love you and want you to be safe. The very best way to do that is to abstain from sex. The next best is to protect yourself and others as competently as you can. Here's how.”

“We know you want to be close to (boyfriend, girlfriend), but there are many ways to express your love and affection. We think that sexual behavior isn’t the best choice for teens. No matter how small, sexual behaviors have the power to cause you pain as well as pleasure. You can come away with strong feelings of regret or guilt or have a negative self image.”

“Our religion has many rules about sex, not because sex is bad but because it is so good! In fact, it is so good and so powerful and so important, that our tradition regards it as sacred and holy. We must always treat it, therefore, in caring, loving and respectful ways and in accordance with the laws of God.” (This came from an Orthodox Rabbi).

What our teens need to know

In addition to communicating our values and beliefs about sexuality, we need to debunk myths and address what’s real. Here are some important messages to give your teens:

“Not everyone is doing it.”

“Having sex does not make you popular.”

“Sex will not improve your relationship.”

“Sex is not a way to prove yourself.”

“You never owe anyone sex.”

“It’s never too late to say no.”

“Beware of risky situations.”

“Get wise to media messages.”

“Don’t fall for lines.”

“Alcohol and other drugs affect your ability to make wise choices.”

“Pregnancy prevention is the responsibility of boys as well as girls.”

“There are other ways of being emotionally close.”

This list could be much larger. We need to think carefully about what “wisdom” we want to share, and make sure the conversation is a discussion, not a monologue or lecture. We need to hear from them, too – what they think, what their values are, who they are.

Rules about dating behavior

It's normal for teens to fall in love. They are exploring if they are lovable and how others see them. However, we need to set some boundaries on dating and give reasons why. The age when boys and girls start dating has fallen consistently since the 1980s. Experts agree that parents should discourage or forbid one-on-one dating until a teen is sixteen. Dating before then can lead to early sexual behavior and all the risks that accompany this, including pregnancy, disease and broken hearts.

When our teens do date, we may not approve of our daughter and her boyfriend making out on the couch or spending time in the bedroom behind closed doors. We may decide that spending time alone in the family room is fine but with the doors open. We have every right to make these rules and doing so will send clear messages. We can't just tell them to "just say no" and then give them opportunities to fail. They need more support from us. Talking about your own challenges as a teen and how you tried to address them, who you turned to, and the lessons learned can also be very helpful for your teen.

We can teach our teens that healthy relationships thrive on self-esteem, love, respect, affection, closeness, integrity, communication, mutual consent, responsibility, and commitment. We can model healthy relationships, even if we don't have a spouse or partner. After all, we are in a caring relationship with our kids. We can model healthy relationship practices there.

Above all, we can be the caring adults that our children can go to with worries and questions. That is the one resource that really matters as they grow up.

Resources

An excellent resource for parents on this challenging subject is your local family planning office. KVCAP Health Services will provide information and resources to parents. Contact Andrea Pasco at 859-1584 or Jody Trost at 859-2529. The Family Planning Association of Maine is also a key resource. Call their education and outreach department at 622-7524.

The Web site of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (www.teenpregnancy.org) is a terrific resource for parents.

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