Starting Early — Sexuality Education for Children Ages 10 to 14 (Early Adolescence)

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Children are full of questions, and as they grow from toddlers to adolescents, their questions change from "Why do zebras have stripes?" to "Why is my body changing?" or "Why do I feel so mixed up?"

The years from 10 to 14 are ones of discovery and questioning. Young adolescents question themselves, their sexuality and how they fit into the world. Although these questions are intensely personal, parents, peers and the social and cultural environment can all influence the answers.

Parents often have concerns and questions about their child's developing sexuality. Parents want their children to be comfortable about sexuality, but they also want their sons and daughters to wait until they are older and more mature before having a sexual relationship.

It may be difficult for you to talk to your young teen about sexual issues, but it is important that your child discusses his or her concerns with you to receive accurate information. Your child's peer group is becoming increasingly important, but most young adolescents prefer to receive sexuality information from their parents and depend on their parents for guidance and setting limits. It is never too late to begin discussing sexuality with your child.

Effective parents are available, open to their young teen's questions and concerns and are able to share their values with their child. They respect their child's privacy and are sensitive to both the content and the feelings expressed in their child's conversation.

Although communicating about sexuality is easier if you also discussed sexuality with your child when he or she was younger, it is not too late to begin.
Close observation will tell you when your child is ready to talk.

Even though you may be comfortable and willing to discuss sexuality with your teen, your child may not know how to bring up the subject. Watch and listen carefully to find out if your child has questions about sexuality. Your teen may:

- Tell you third-person anecdotes about "a person in school who."
- Ask, "What would you do if?"
- Have an intense touching relationship with a boy or girl friend.
- Display no reaction to the physical and physiological changes of puberty. This may indicate that your child is unsure about how to initiate a discussion of these issues with you.

How can you discuss sexuality if your child doesn't ask questions?

- Really listen when your child is talking. Don't judge or give lectures. Always set aside time to talk and listen to each other.
- Ask your child's opinion of news stories about issues such as male/female relationships, teenage pregnancy or sexuality on television.
- Buy a reliable, attractive book on sexuality (or check one out from the library) and leave it where your teen spends time: on the couch, by the television or by the telephone. In a few days ask his or her opinion about the book and a specific topic in the book.
- Watch a television show together and discuss male/female roles and the relationships portrayed.

What every teen wants to know

You may not want to discuss every aspect of sexuality with your child, but you need to show that you know your child is interested in sex. There are some general questions that most teens want and need to know the answers to.

- What are the physical and emotional changes boys and girls go through during adolescence?
- What is sexual behavior?
- What do you consider "normal" sexual behavior?
- How should girls talk to boys, how should boys talk to girls, how can he/she express feelings?
What are personal values and how do they influence sexual decisions?
How do you make rational decisions? How do you say no?
What is a sexually transmitted disease?
What are the short- and long-term health consequences of sexually transmitted disease?
Is masturbation harmful?

Help your adolescent develop healthy attitudes about sexuality

- Be a good role model. Be honest, open and responsible, and show that you care about others.
- Clarify your own views and values about sexuality and sexual behavior.
- Help your child understand the changes of adolescence and respond to his or her concerns about what is normal.
- Recognize and be willing to respond to your child's interests and concerns about the opposite sex and sex in general.
- Be informed about sexuality and provide appropriate reading materials for your young teen (always read these materials before you share them with your child).
- Understand that your child's self-esteem may be vulnerable at this time because of his or her emerging sexuality and new relationships with peers, parents and others.
- Be generous with your sincere approval. Don't criticize or "put down" your child.
- Recognize your young teen's need for more independence. Give your child opportunities to be both independent and responsible.
- Discuss your attitudes and values with your child. Honesty is important, but do not confuse this with lecturing. Don't demand that your child agree with you.
- Be willing to openly discuss values that differ from yours. Show that you enjoy listening to your child's opinions and sharing your opinions with your child. By doing this, you show that it is OK for your child to ask questions about values.
- Understand what you can and cannot control. You can set limits on how late your young teen stays out, and to some extent, where he or she goes. You cannot control your child's sexual behavior or what their values and attitudes will be.
- Don't lecture your child and don't make threats. These are roadblocks to communication and may encourage rebellious behavior.

Be a role model, discuss your values, provide accurate information and openly talk with your child about his or her questions and concerns — this is how you can influence your child's decisions. To help your child be independent and responsible, set appropriate limits and help your child feel good about himself or herself.
Relax when discussing sexuality with your young adolescent.

Parents are often uncomfortable with this issue. Your parents may not have talked with you, and you may remember your own feelings and behavior as you were growing up. You can overcome your reluctance to talk with your son or daughter.

The first step is to recognize your own values and attitudes. Admit to yourself that this is a difficult task, but one you know you want to do. Accurate information is a powerful tool. Obtain a good book on sexuality and find out what issues adolescents are worried about. Discuss sexuality issues with your partner or a friend to practice talking about sensitive issues. Relax and enjoy communicating with your child.

Additional reading

For parents


For parents and teens


