

Parents Matter

Your children want to learn
about the facts of life from

YOU



Today, there's a whole lot more to talk about than the birds and the bees.

The information in this brochure is intended to help you—the parent—begin to talk with your child about sexuality and the risks of sexual activity. This brochure addresses questions you may have, such as

- Why should I talk with my child about topics related to sexuality? page 3
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We hope this brochure will inspire you to get the information you need to talk with your child about this important subject.



Why should I talk with my child about topics related to sexuality?

The teen years are a joyful time of transition, but they are also full of potential risks. By the time they are in 9th grade (around age 14), one third of high school students say they've had sex.¹ Pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV (the virus that causes AIDS), can endanger your child's health. Each year 2 of 10 sexually active female adolescents gets pregnant² and 1 of 4 sexually active teens acquires an STD.³

You as a parent have a unique opportunity to talk with your child about sexuality. Sexuality deals with the biological, social, psychological, and spiritual dimensions that encompass sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, communication, decision-making and behaviors of individuals. Unlike programs or classes, parents are a source of information that is always close at hand. Compared with other sources of information, you are in a better position to

- Answer questions right away
- Share your values about sexuality
- Talk about sexuality more than just one time
- Build upon past talks as your children grow and develop
- Build upon what children learn about sexuality from other sources and help separate the facts from the myths and rumors



The bottom line is that you are your child's best source of information. Talking with your child about sexuality, the risks of sexual activity, and ways to avoid or reduce those risks is an important part of parenting.

Sexual images and messages are everywhere. For example, they're on billboards, in the movies, on TV, in magazines, and on the Internet. Children hear a lot about sexuality from friends and siblings—much of it incorrect. To make sure that what your children are learning and hearing is both correct and consistent with your sexual values, you need to talk to them and present a clear message about this important subject.

Studies show

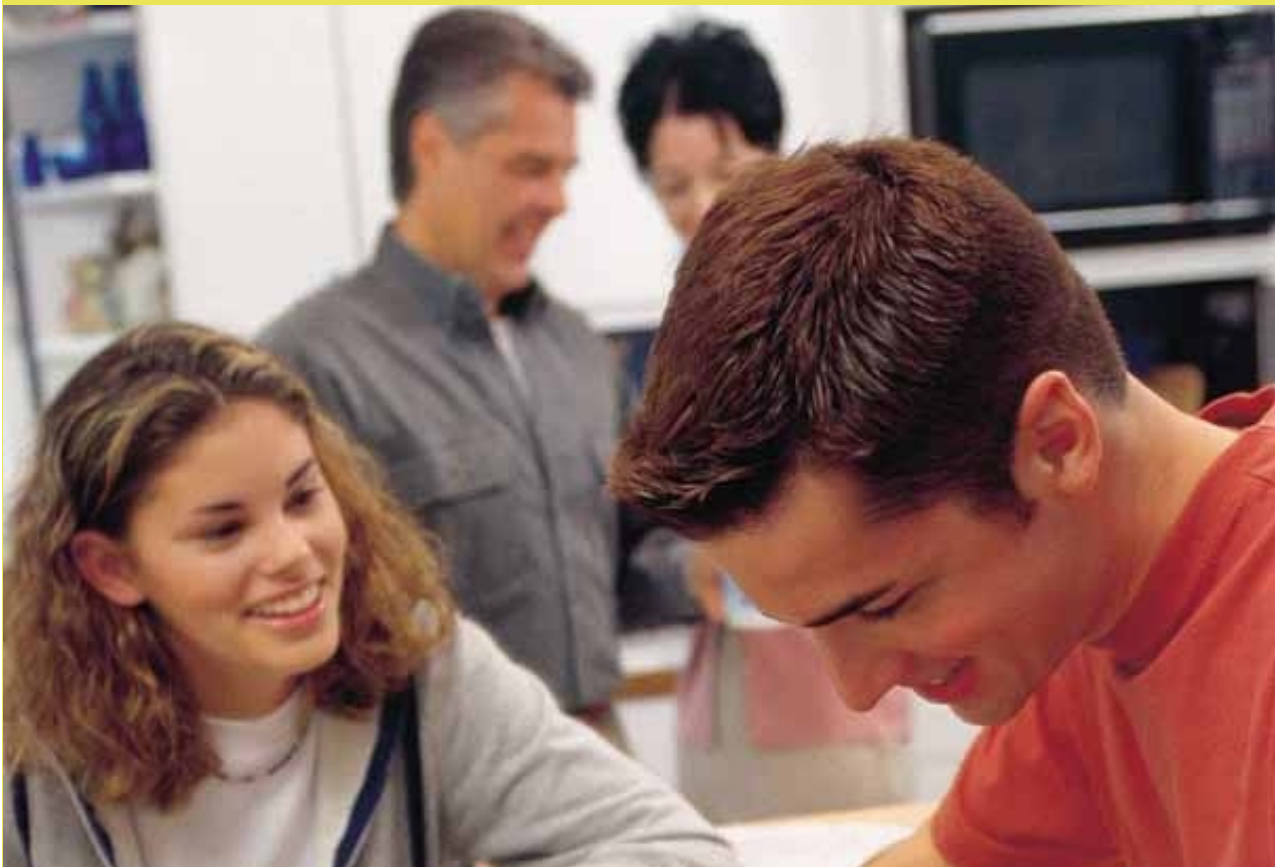
- More than 75% of adolescents express a need for more information about sexuality.⁴
- Young people rate parents as their top source of information about sexuality.⁴
- Nearly all teens (87%) agree that it would be easier to delay sex and prevent pregnancy if teens were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.⁵



What does it mean to talk about sexuality?

Talking with your child about sexuality helps him or her understand these important parts of growing up:

- What physical and emotional changes they can expect during puberty
- How to develop decision-making and problem-solving skills to help them cope with their personal relationships
- How to know when they are ready to date
- How to resist peer pressure to be sexually active
- How to know when they are mature enough and responsible enough to become sexually active



What does it mean to talk about avoiding or reducing sexual risk?

Studies show that it is very important to teach children about the risks of sexual activity, such as unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV infection. The risks are real, even for teens who think “it won’t happen to me.” You can teach your child how to avoid or reduce these risks by discussing the following

- Abstaining from sexual activity
- Delaying the age at which they first have sex
- If sexually active, practicing safer sex by using condoms consistently and correctly



When is my child ready to hear about sexuality?

Start early. Children are bombarded with information from many sources, including the media and their peers, so they may have questions early. Just because they haven't asked you questions doesn't mean they haven't heard things or aren't ready to learn about sexuality. Sometimes children—just like parents—have questions and want to talk but they don't know how to start the conversation. When you don't bring up this important topic, your child may think you're not interested or that sexuality is not an acceptable subject to discuss with you.



Here are a few general tips for talking with your child:

- Help get the conversation started with your child by asking questions.
- When it comes to talking about sexuality, HOW you say it is just as important as WHAT you say. Parents who are comfortable and confident will inspire their children to really listen to what they are saying.
- Be alert to teachable moments—everyday opportunities to discuss sexuality with your child.

Teachable moments are more common than you might think. For instance, after watching a TV show in which a teen gets an STD or becomes pregnant, ask your child some questions—Did the character make appropriate decisions? How could he or she have avoided the situation? How would you handle a similar situation? Lead into a conversation with your child about his or her thoughts and feelings about important matters of sexuality. Along the way, give your children the facts, correct false ideas or information, pass on your values, and teach them to make decisions that will keep them healthy.



How do I get started?

Get comfortable and be confident. One of the best ways to be confident is to be prepared. However, instead of preparing for one big talk, prepare for many as-needed shorter talks over the course of raising your child.

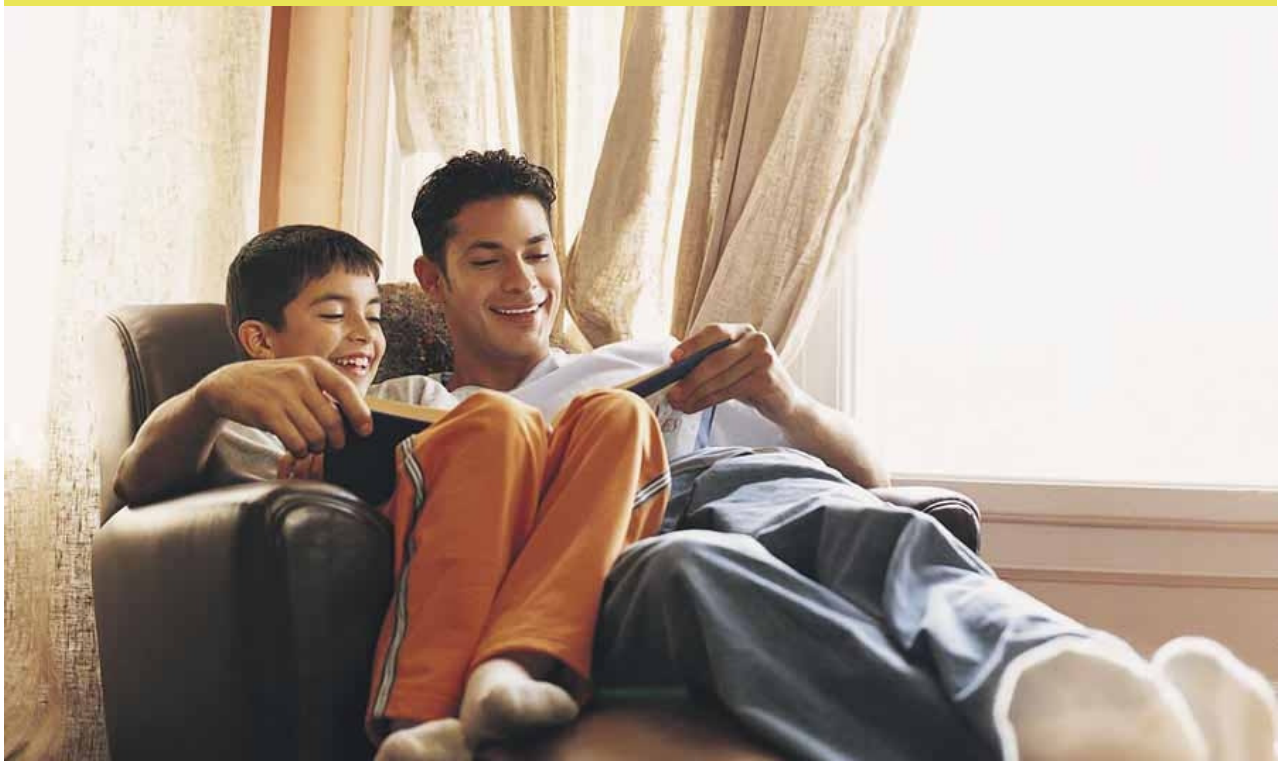
Here are some more tips and information to help you prepare for conversations about sexuality:

- Ask a pediatrician for advice and information—he or she is trained to give you the facts you need and offer advice on answering questions about sexuality accurately and in a way that is appropriate to your child’s age.
- Don’t feel that you have to tell your child everything in one conversation—take advantage of teachable moments to talk again and again.
- Get the information you need to give answers that your child will understand (see page 11 for additional resources).
- Listen and learn from other parents who have had experience talking with their children about sexuality. Find out what worked for them.



- When possible, decide ahead of time what topics you will talk about so that you can prepare.
- Know what your values are so you can communicate them clearly.
- Learn to really listen to your child.
- Find out where your child's questions are coming from before you answer so that you can give answers that are appropriate to his or her age and concerns.
- Remember, just because your child asks a question about sexuality doesn't mean he or she is having—or planning to have—sex.

Recognize that your child may begin at a very early age to ask you questions. You don't need to have all the answers right away. There are lots of great materials to help you learn what to say and when to say it.



Where can I get the accurate information I need?

A pediatrician is a very good source of information on sexuality and sexual risk reduction. He or she can provide you with reliable information to help guide conversations with your child. There are many other resources on how to discuss these topics with your child. Remember, it is up to you to decide what messages you want to give to your child. If you or your child uses the Internet, the following Web sites may be helpful (these are just a few of the many sites that are available):

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) www.aap.org

Find tips and suggestions on a range of child health issues, including the effects of media (TV, radio, movies) on children and helpful parenting books, on this comprehensive children's health Web site.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) www.cdc.gov

Search for any health topic from A to Z, including child and adolescent health and HIV/AIDS and STD prevention.

Kaiser Family Foundation www.kff.org

Click on youth-related pages to get fact sheets and current statistics.



Kids' Health www.kidshealth.org

Look at pages for parents to find tips on how to give age-appropriate information to your child in a way he or she can understand and accept. Site also includes good pages for children and teens.

National Prevention Information Network (NPIN) www.cdcnpin.org

Go to CDC's NPIN Web site for good information about HIV/AIDS and STD prevention, including contact information for health information specialists.

Not Me, Not Now www.notmenotnow.org

Find information about preventing pregnancy by promoting abstinence, as well as tips for starting age-appropriate conversations with your child.

Talking with Kids about Tough Issues www.talkingwithkids.org

Find good suggestions for starting conversations with your child about sexuality, HIV/AIDS, violence, drugs, and alcohol on this comprehensive site.



You'll find many books at bookstores or your local library that can help prepare you for discussions about sexuality with your child.

If you go to your local public library for educational materials, ask your librarian or look for books on this topic in both the juvenile and adult nonfiction sections shelved under call numbers 612, 613 and 649. These call numbers indicate the shelf location of the following subjects:

- Parenting
- Family Life Education
- Sexuality Education
- Sexuality



References

- ¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Surveillance Summaries, May 21, 2004. MMWR 2004;53(No. SS-2).
- ² AGI, Teenage pregnancy: overall trends and state-by-state information, New York: AGI, 1999, Table 1; and Henshaw SK, U.S. Teenage pregnancy statistics with comparative statistics for women aged 20-24, New York: AGI, 1999, p. 5.
- ³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Tracking the hidden epidemics. Trends in STDs in the United States, 2000 (Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000).
- ⁴ Kaiser Family Foundation. National survey of adolescents and young adults: sexual health knowledge, attitudes and experiences. (Online). 2003. (cited 2003 May 29). Available from URL: www.kff.org/youthhivstds/3218-index.cfm.
- ⁵ Albert, B. 2004. With one voice: America's adults and teens sound off about teen pregnancy. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.