

Early Adolescent Sexual Risk Behavior: What Can Parents Do?

Research suggests that by tenth grade, 44% of adolescents nationwide report having had sex. Many parents find this a difficult topic to bring up with their children, and once they have the “birds and the bees” talk it can be tempting to consider the job done. However, keeping an open dialogue is critical to addressing the developmental changes that are inherent in discussions about sexual behavior. A series of conversations about sex can begin when a child is young and continue throughout their teens.

Here are some tips that can make these conversations easier for parents:

Recognize that sex is a normal human behavior and that many people begin having sexual feelings at an early age.

Managing those feelings, particularly in the absence of adults who will discuss them, can be challenging. People are bombarded with subtle (or not so subtle) sexual messages all the time, which can prompt confusion.

Think ahead about your message.

If you are planning a conversation with your teen, think about the main idea that you want to get across. It may be that you want them to be aware of your values, or that you want them to have information to make safe decisions, or that you want to establish that you are someone they can talk to about difficult decisions. Knowing where you are headed with the conversation can make it go more smoothly.

Rehearse some key phrases to make sure they feel comfortable to you.

Practice when you're alone in the car or in front of the mirror, listening for whether the way you've phrased something sounds judgmental or suspicious or just plain awkward. Hearing yourself say the words is great practice for feeling comfortable, and having a couple of key phrases related to your main message ready can be helpful if you're nervous. If you're not comfortable with terms you might need to use (like “penis” or “oral sex”) practice saying them out loud ahead of time to make it easier.

If you don't know something, say so.

Embarrassment is a common barrier to having conversations about sex, because sometimes parents worry that their kids will ask things they aren't prepared to answer. “You know, I'm not 100% sure about that, and I don't want to tell you the wrong thing” is a great answer that conveys that the question is important and that the parent is invested in giving good information. Parents can use this as a natural entry point to having a follow-up conversation later, or they can use it as an opportunity to research the answer together to show their teens how to get accurate information about sex.

Prepare to hear things that might surprise you.

Listen and consider that early teens (and younger) talk about sex, even if they aren't yet sexually active. This means that they are probably getting "information" from their peers, which may or may not be accurate. Parents who talk about sexuality with their children can correct misconceptions. If you're worried your child might not come to you with questions or problems, suggest an adult you trust as a source of information. Better a trusted adult than a child's friend without accurate facts.

Consider your values.

Teens are often interested in what their parents think about things like sex, even if they don't ask directly, and their values have been shown to mirror their parents. Convey these while recognizing that the point of view that your child has might not be the same as your own, since you have different life experiences.

Use naturally occurring moments to start discussions.

Scenes in movies, lyrics in music, celebrity scandals reported on television, or pictures in magazines are great conversation starters. They can be opportunities to ask your child's opinions and express some of your values.

Avoid judgment.

Let teens express their opinions in order to have a two-way conversation. Use facts about risk as a way to express concern (e.g., "yes, some people do that, but it's important to remember that they can catch diseases that way").

Start early.

Even the best conversations can have limited impact if the timing is wrong. The best time for parents to talk to children is *before* their child needs the information, not after.

Source: This handout was excerpted from text prepared by Chris Houck, Ph.D., a staff psychologist at Rhode Island Hospital in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at the Warren Alpert Medical School.

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