



Lots of Ways to Help

Infants and Toddlers - Young School-Age Children
Preteens - Young Teenagers - Parents

Develop a Healthy, Responsible Sexuality

Adapted from a brochure by the Coalition on
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For Parent of *Infants and Toddlers*

Do lots of hugging, cuddling and rocking - it won't spoil your baby but will add to feelings of trust and security, the building blocks of intimacy.

When feeding, by breast or bottle, hold the baby close - this is an important first relationship with another person.

Recognize that boy babies sometimes have erections and girl babies sometimes feel genital stimulation - this is a normal physical reaction to stimulation, like "goose bumps" when cold. There will be plenty of time to teach about privacy later – infants just get to enjoy their bodies.

Ignore the baby's touching or rubbing of his/her genitals - babies "discover" their genitals just as they discover fingers or toes.

Be dependable about providing food, dry diapers, warmth and other bodily needs - babies learn to trust the world when their needs are met consistently.

Provide all kinds of toys - give kids a chance to discover what they enjoy!

Sucking is a normal, pleasurable experience for infants - give them freedom and opportunity to suck on objects that are safe.

Wait to do toilet training - toddlers don't have good muscle control until at least 18 months to 2 years of age.

Little children think in concrete terms of right and wrong, good and bad - it is important that they learn their bodies are good.

REMEMBER:

*At any age, a "bad" answer, lovingly given,
is better than embarrassed silence.*

You will have many chances to communicate about sex, love, and intimacy with your child. An occasional less-than-perfect answer will not do permanent damage.



For Parents of *Preschoolers*

Preschool children are curious and eager to learn about everything - curiosity about bodies is just one part of this need to learn.

Answer a preschooler's questions with simple, honest answers - don't be concerned about "telling too much" - he or she will tune out when he/she has heard enough.

If your child hasn't started asking questions by four or five, look for occasions to bring up the subject - a mother bathing a baby, a pregnant woman, etc.

Use medically accurate terms for bodily functions and body parts.

Use praise and reward for proper toileting rather than punishments for mistakes.

If first attempts at toilet training are unsuccessful, wait a few months and try again.

Children may "play with themselves" because it feels good, is comforting; teach private vs. public behavior in a non-scolding way, using toileting as an example.

Teach your child to bathe him or herself - include all parts of the body.

When preschoolers explore each other's bodies, tell them it's okay to be curious and that you will answer their questions - you might add, "you should keep your clothes on when playing - bodies are private" (make sure one child is not using force of any kind on the other).

Give your child the right to make choices about showing affection - do not insist she "give everyone a goodnight kiss" or "give Eddie a hug."



For Parents of *Young School-Age Children*

Allow your child privacy - this is the age of developing a sense of modesty.

Teach the difference between privacy (you can do it by yourself!) And secrecy (not telling parents). Encourage privacy, discourage secrecy, and ask to be told if anyone asks the child to keep a secret.

Encourage healthy friendships - avoid making friendships self-conscious and something they are not. Don't ask "is he your boyfriend?" "do you kiss her?"

Pay close attention to all of your child's friendships - children of this age may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation as during this 'latency phase' sex can be very far from top-of-mind!

Help your child to make responsible decisions about what to wear, how to spend money, choosing healthy foods, and all aspects of self-care and keeping healthy.

If your child asks questions about sex, answer them with short, factual answers followed by a question that invites more questions.

Provide separate beds for siblings - sexual arousal happens automatically in sleep and is not meant to be shared; this is another reason children should not routinely sleep with parents.

Calmly explain the meaning of "four letter words" that the child brings home - say you don't want your child to use them because they have meanings that the child does not yet understand, and most of them are not nice!

Help children to understand that they should say "no" to anyone touching their genitals, or to being asked to handle anyone else's genitals - your body is private and you have the right to tell anyone "no."

If sexual abuse occurs, help the child know it is never his or her fault and always the fault of the older child or adult involved. Assure the child that any promises made "not to tell" must not be kept. Be calm – strong expressions of anger toward the offender, strong statements about caring for the child's wellbeing are fine, but overreactions like threatening revenge make things even more difficult for the child.



For Parents of *Preteens*

Talk about the difference between sexual attraction and real love!

Tell preteens about normal changes during puberty before those changes occur - help boys and girls understand menstruation, “wet dreams”, the process of reproduction and genital arousal

Let them know that differences in rate of change and growth are normal, “some girls start their periods at 10; some not until years later.”

Help them understand that boys “grow up” about two years later than girls.

Recognize and embrace signs of change - a preteen may act like a child one minute and like an adult the next.

Don’t push adult-like behaviors, clothes, make-up, etc. Do not call going to the movies with a friend “a date.”

“Perhaps you’ve been wondering about...” is a way to start a discussion. Don’t wait for the child to ask. Be a good listener; be careful not to embarrass him or her.

Lots of myths are still around about masturbation or “playing with yourself” - masturbation is common or abnormal. It only does physical or psychological if guilt or shame has been attached to it.

Remind your preteen that one’s body is private - tell him or her to reject sexual advances, from anyone, quickly and firmly, and to tell a trusted adult friend when you are not there to help.

Be clear and honest about potential harm, including sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancy. A pediatrician can be helpful, providing ‘anticipatory guidance’ during annual physicals. Balance this with knowing that fear tactics alone never work.

Praise your preteen for good decisions - talk about what a “good decision” and “being responsible” means.

Help him/her be a thoughtful, considerate friend.



For Parents of *Young Teenagers*

Have confidence in him/her - don't jump to conclusions if something seems amiss.

Teens draw values from many places - friends, school, media, faith-based institutions, home, etc. Friends are especially important as teens try to become more independent of you. Yet, the parent will remain a most important source, if communication is kept open.

If you don't fulfill your teen's need for information about sex, someone or something else will. All too often it's on-line pornography, the absolutely worst source of accurate information and healthy values.

Avoid lecturing - talk with him or her, not at them. Use television, movies, music, and news stories to open discussions.

It is not unusual for young teens to be interested in sexually oriented material. On-line sexual images are ubiquitous, and many depict violent and otherwise harmful acts. It is physically normal to experience sexual arousal when experiencing such materials, meaning it is critical to ensure kids know that arousal is an autonomic reflex, and their bodies reaction does NOT mean they should engage in that behavior.

Together, look at the many different gender roles that are part of our society

Avoid the temptation to use sexually transmitted diseases, or legal concerns to scare your child into not having sex. Scaring teens has never effectively stopped sexual activity; better to keep communication open and stress smart choices.

Talk about the difference between thoughts and actions.

Help teens realize that confusion or ambiguous feelings about their sexuality are normal - most teens wonder at one time or another about their sexual orientation.



For Parents of *Older Teenagers*

Make home a place where your teen is always accepted and welcome.

Maintain expressions of affection with your child, too often parents shy away from physical affection with teens, fearing their own potential genital arousal.

Remember, very little can be accomplished when talking about sex turns into an argument.

Set limits together - negotiate and discuss the need both of you have – you to ensure their safety and them to experience independence.

Talk about what it means to be sexually moral - consider the immorality of using another person, of bringing an unwanted baby into the world, of spreading sexually transmitted infections., of requesting or sharing explicit photos, etc.

Be honest about your own feelings if you disagree with your teen's choice of friends and/or lifestyle.

Talk about the many ways to show someone you really care for him or her.

Teens reach the legal age of majority as young as age 16 in some states - know the law in your state and be sure your teen knows the implication of activities like sending nude photos, sharing sexually explicit emails and other behaviors that could be considered pornography, abuse, bullying or harassment.

Talk about the different expectations teens may have from each other - what might they be looking for through sexual activity? Affection? A committed relationship?

Discuss the kinds of "lines" teens use on each other to initiate sexual activity.

Help your teen make good decisions by suggesting how to get information - they need factual, unbiased information on contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual response, homosexuality and other topics.

For Parents at *14, 40, or Any Age ...*

You need and deserve time to yourself - arrange at least two hours each week away from your child. If you do not have a babysitter, take turns with friends.

If you are uncomfortable talking to your child about sex, practice talking with another adult - take turns role-playing the child with the questions and the adult who tries to answer them.

Think through your own values in the various areas of sexuality, and share them with your child - remember, values change over time with new experiences.

An occasional sexual thought or feeling about your child is normal - but acting out sexually with your child or any child is not and a sign that professional help is needed.

Kissing your partner in the kitchen? A friendly pat on the rear?

Of course! By modeling physical affection and discussing affection and love with your child, they learn what's acceptable behavior.

If you are a single parent, try not to "put down" the absent parent to your child. If possible, help the child to have lots of time with parent. Don't put your child into an adult role – "man of the house" or "my little homemaker." And keep your new sex-life (which you deserve) away from your kids!

Special thoughts about **SEXUAL SAFETY**

- **Learn the signs indicating that a sexual predator may be operating in your community;** adults who primarily gravitate to children, who have a child as a 'special friend' or who open their homes to kids; learn more at sexwiseparent.com or enoughabuse.org
- **Know every adult or older child spending 'alone-time' with your child,** relatives, babysitters everyone – even people you're dating – and gently -ALWAYS!- ask the details of how the time together was spent.
- **Ensure that any school, club, faith-based agency, child care center any place where your child will be without you** – has sex abuse prevention protocols that meet professional standards, are regularly enforced and involve parents.

The Final Thought

Parents consistently underestimate the influence they have on their kids' decisions about sex – always remember that they are watching and listening, even when they pretend not to be!