

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 62

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TALKING TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT SEX

Talking to your children about love, intimacy, and sex is an important part of parenting. Parents can be very helpful by creating a comfortable atmosphere in which to talk to their children about these issues. However, many parents avoid or postpone the discussion. Each year about one million teenage girls become pregnant in the United States and three million teens get a sexually transmitted disease. Children and adolescents need input and guidance from parents to help them make healthy and appropriate decisions regarding their sexual behavior since they can be confused and over-stimulated by what they see and hear. Information about sex obtained by children from the Internet can often be inaccurate and/or inappropriate.

Talking about sex may be uncomfortable for both parents and children. Parents should respond to the needs and curiosity level of their individual child, offering no more or less information than their child is asking for and is able to understand. Getting advice from a clergyman, pediatrician, family physician, or other health professional may be helpful. Books that use illustrations or diagrams may aid communication and understanding.

Children have different levels of curiosity and understanding depending upon their age and level of maturity. As children grow older, they will often ask for more details about sex. Many children have their own words for body parts. It is important to find out words they know and are comfortable with to make talking with them easier. A five-year-old may be happy with the simple answer that babies come from a seed that grows in a special place inside the mother. Dad helps when his seed combines with mom's seed which causes the baby to start to grow. An eight-year-old may want to know how dad's seed gets to mom's seed. Parents may want to talk about dad's seed (or sperm) coming from his penis and combining with mom's seed (or egg) in her uterus. Then the baby grows in the safety of mom's uterus for nine months until it is strong enough to be born. An 11-year-old may want to know even more and parents can help by talking about how a man and woman fall in love and then may decide to have sex.

It is important to talk about the responsibilities and consequences that come from being sexually active. Pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and feelings about sex are important issues to be discussed. Talking to your children can help them make the decisions that are best for them without feeling pressured to do something before they are ready. Helping children understand that these are decisions that require maturity and responsibility will increase the chance that they make good choices.

Adolescents are able to talk about lovemaking and sex in terms of dating and relationships. They may need help dealing with the intensity of their own sexual feelings, confusion regarding their sexual identity, and sexual behavior in a relationship. Concerns regarding masturbation, menstruation, contraception, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted

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diseases are common. Some adolescents also struggle with conflicts around family, religious or cultural values. Open communication and accurate information from parents increases the chance that teens will postpone sex and will use appropriate methods of birth control once they begin.

In talking with your child or adolescent, it is helpful to:

- Encourage your child to talk and ask questions.
- Maintain a calm and non-critical atmosphere for discussions.
- Use words that are understandable and comfortable.
- Try to determine your child’s level of knowledge and understanding.
- Keep your sense of humor and don’t be afraid to talk about your own discomfort.
- Relate sex to love, intimacy, caring, and respect for oneself and one’s partner.
- Be open in sharing your values and concerns.
- Discuss the importance of responsibility for choices and decisions.
- Help your child to consider the pros and cons of choices.

By developing open, honest and ongoing communication about responsibility, sex, and choice, parents can help their youngsters learn about sex in a healthy and positive manner.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

#31 When Children Have Children,

#30 Children & AIDS,

9 Child Sexual Abuse, and

#63 Gay and Lesbian Teens.

See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).

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