

Tips for How to Talk to Your Teens About Relationships and Their Sexual Health

Do you feel uncomfortable or unsure of how to talk to your teen about healthy relationships and sex? This tip sheet provides suggestions on how to engage your teens in conversations about creating and maintaining healthy relationships. Additionally, it provides you—as parents, guardians, and caregivers—with things to keep in mind while having these conversations with your teens.

The accompanying set of conversation cards provides a set of prompts that will help you start these sometimes difficult and uncomfortable conversations. There are general prompts that apply to all caregivers, and there are also more specific prompts for different parent and caregiver groups.

Remember that YOU play an important role in helping your teens understand these topics. Your teens want to discuss these topics with YOU. Having a communication plan with your teen begins with expressing and confirming love, care, and support for them, no matter where the conversations may lead.



Setting the Stage

Know that this is not a one-time conversation and will be an ongoing discussion.

Each youth has their preferred way of communicating. Some teens prefer physical separation when talking, such as sitting on opposite ends of the couch playing video games or while driving in the car. Other teens may prefer sitting close and making eye contact when having these conversations. Conversations could also be more comfortable and flow more easily while doing activities together, like cooking or walking. It's important to understand your teen's preferences.

Let go of previously conceived stereotypes that may come from popular television shows and movies, such as "boys just want to have sex," "nice guys finish last," or "girls like bad boys."

Create a comfortable environment for your teen. Teens should feel welcomed, safe, and reassured with love. Creating this type of environment for your teen provides a place for emotional safety to discuss topics related to relationships and sexual health. Consider starting conversations about sensitive topics at an early age, well before your child's teen years.

Talk with your children early and often about healthy relationships, sex, and love. This will help increase the comfort level with the discussion topics. Additionally, because this is an ongoing conversation, it's important for you to keep talking to your children and teens about their relationships and sexual health. These tips, resources, and conversation cards were developed with teenagers in mind. Resources for younger children can be found from trusted sources online or from your child's pediatrician.

Setting the Stage

Don't overreact to your teen's questions or statements.

Your teen's comments or answers may shock you or make you feel uncomfortable. Overreacting to their comments can cause teens to withdraw or shut down, or they may be afraid to ask about sensitive topics in the future. An alternative reaction to unexpected comments could be, "What I hear you saying is..." or "Can you tell me a little more about this..."

Listen to your teen. Let your teen be an expert on their own world. Let them talk about what is going on around them and how their peers are reacting. Let them reach conclusions by themselves rather than lecturing or bombarding with information.



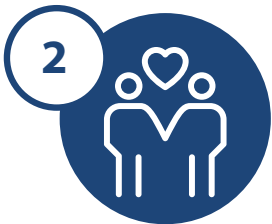
Have your own support system. Your teen may disclose concerns about relationships, sex, and situations they are experiencing that you may or may not be prepared to hear. It's important that adults seek support to deal with their emotions, like stress, concern, or frustration. Developing a support system with friends, close family members, community religious organizations, or other peer support helps you mentally prepare and discuss personal concerns that stem from conversations with your teen. Make sure to have someone in mind to turn to if you need emotional or mental support.

Having the Conversation



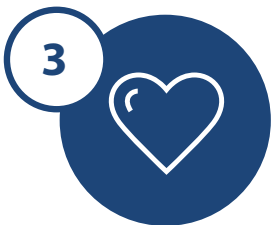
Be comfortable with the uncomfortable

This is not an easy topic, but it's important for you—as the parent, guardian, or caregiver—to overcome the discomfort and start the conversation. Your teen wants to talk about this, but they may be too afraid to ask.



Be clear about your own values and attitudes regarding sex and relationships

Demonstrate openness and honesty about values and encourage curiosity. It's important for you to share your own values about sex and relationships while also being open to an honest conversation with your teen that allows them to explore their understanding. It's also important for you and any co-parents or caregivers to be on the same page in terms of values, discussion topics, home rules, and expectations. Mixed messaging regarding sex and relationships can cause confusion for your teen. Even if you and your co-parent or caregiver disagree, you need to decide what to share and what is expected of your teen.



Define what a healthy relationship looks like

Be clear about what a healthy relationship looks like and the types of characteristics that define those relationships. Provide examples of relationships that your teen may be familiar with in real life or in pop culture, such as TV or movie characters, and discuss the scenarios they encounter.

Having the Conversation



Make sure you have the right information to share

We are always learning more about how to have healthy relationships and take care of ourselves. Make sure your information on sex, relationships, and health is up to date by checking your knowledge against trusted resources, such as those in the table on the next page.



Look for teachable moments

You don't need to schedule a time to have discussions about relationships and sex. Look for teachable moments with your teen, talk about their thoughts and experiences, and share your hopes and expectations for them. For example, if your teen talks about a friend flirting with someone they are interested in while in the car, you can continue the conversation by asking if they have feelings for anyone and ask why that person is attractive to them.



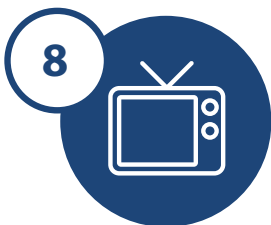
Create home rules together

Even though most teens will not admit it, they like to have rules that are enforced by parents/caregivers. Rules give structure to teens' lives and help them feel loved and secure when they are enforced. If you allow your teen to provide input when setting home rules and agreements, they will be more likely to honor and follow them. Suggested home rules discussion topics might include rules for dating, rules for when they have friends or partners over, or rules for after-school or unsupervised hours.



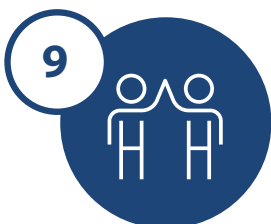
Ask questions in a sequence

Teens are more likely to engage in initial conversations that are more general in nature and not about their specific experiences. As conversations get more comfortable over time, begin asking questions that build on your teen's personal experiences and thoughts about relationships and sex.



Use fictional characters (e.g., TV, movie characters) to help start the discussion

Watch TV with your teens. Movies and TV can provide opportunities to ask questions and spark conversations about healthy relationships and sexuality in the context of relatable characters. It's sometimes easier for teenagers to discuss fictional characters instead of talking about themselves and their own views and relationships.



Encourage teens to ask you about your own experiences

While you are communicating and learning about your teen, encourage them to ask questions about your experiences. For example, past dating and relationships experiences, how you met your significant other, social and dating expectations when you were your teen's age, etc. This can be a sensitive area and you may feel guilty about your past, but it's OK to want better for your children. Youth will appreciate that you want what is best for them when you are able to clearly explain expectations and provide reasoning.

The following table presents resources that you—as parents, guardians, and caregivers—can explore for additional guidance on how to talk to your teens about their relationships and sexual health. These resources include additional tips, fact sheets, and other resources on many topics, such as using social media to engage with your teens.

Resources

Title	Description	Link
The Talk. How Adults Can Promote Young People’s Healthy Relationships and Prevent Misogyny and Sexual Harassment	A report provides adults information on how to start deeper conversations with their youth about love, sex, consent, and healthy relationships.	https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b7c56e255b02c683659fe43/t/5bd51a0324a69425bd079b59/1540692500558/mcc_the_talk_final.pdf
Parent-Child Communication Tip Sheet	The Family & Youth Services Bureau, Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program tip sheet on how parents can best communicate with their children.	https://teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/resource-files/Parent_Child_Communication.pdf
Talking with Teens About Relationships	The Office of Population Affairs provides tips for parents on how to talk with their teens about relationships.	https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-training/for-families/relationships/index.html
Tips Sheets for Parents and Caregivers	A list of resources and tip sheets for parents and caregivers ranging in topics from managing stress to connecting with your teen. Tip sheets on specific parenting issues and calendars listing ways that parents, programs, and community partners can build relationships and community.	https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/tipsheets-2016_en.pdf
Talking with Your Teens about Sex: Going Beyond “the Talk”	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides a fact sheet for parents on how to talk to kids about their sexual health so parents have great influence over teens decisions regarding sex.	https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/pdf/talking-teens.pdf
Talking with Teens: Just the Facts	Online tool to find facts on youth reproductive health, mental health, substance abuse, healthy relationships, and physical health and nutrition.	https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-training/for-families/just-the-facts/index.html
Parents, Families, and Guardians: Making a Difference. Think, Act, Grow (TAG)	TAG, the Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Adolescent Health offers action steps and resources for families looking to support their adolescents' health and development.	https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/node/6814
CDC Teen Pregnancy: Multimedia	Technical tool that provides the latest science-based information online.	https://www.cdc.gov/teenpregnancy/socialmedia/multimedia-presentations.htm
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Youth Resources	This CDC website provides resources from CDC, other government agencies, and community organizations for parents of LGBT youth.	https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm

Citations

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