

Talking about Sex and Relationships

A Resource for Parents

Updated February 2017

You may find it hard to believe, but youth want to hear from their parents about their opinions on the issues of sex and relationships. In a survey conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *Survey Says: Parent Power* teens continue to tell us that their parents most influence their decisions about sex:

- 52% of teens ages 12-15 say their parents most influence them, with friends falling in a distant second at 17%
- As teens grow older their friends gain more influence, but parents win with 32% of teens

As parents, knowing that teens say their parents most influence their decisions about sex should be encouraging. This should provide parents with some level of comfort when discussing this subject. However, for many reasons parents often postpone talking with their children about this issue. Oftentimes parents feel uncomfortable and embarrassed about the topic, and worry they might not know how to answer the questions their children ask.

Because children and youth need honest and straightforward information from their parents, the following tips are provided to help parents open the lines of communication about sex and relationships.

- Get a broad foundation of factual information from reliable sources. Sexuality is broader than sexual intercourse. It includes biology, gender and reproduction, but is also about emotions, intimacy, caring, sharing, and loving attitudes.
- Learn and use the correct terms. If you have trouble saying some sexual words without embarrassment, practice the words until you are as comfortable with them as with non-sexual words.
- Start early – children hear about and are coping with tough issues at an early age. Parents have an opportunity to talk with their children about important issues before anyone else can confuse them with incorrect information or explanations that lack the sense of values parents want to instill.
- Talk honestly with your child. Listen more than you speak. Have open, two-way communications. Only by listening can you understand, especially about love and sexuality.
- Not knowing the answer is okay – just follow up by offering to find the answer or work with your child to find the answer.

Talking with Young Children

- If a child is old enough to ask, they are old enough to hear the correct answer and learn the correct words.
- Understand the question – you don't want to launch into a long answer that does not answer the child's question.
- Answer when asked – there isn't always time for long talks and kids resist formal discussions. Use everyday moments as occasions for important conversations. If the time is inappropriate, set a time when you will answer fully.

Talking with Teens

- Remember how you felt when you were a teen. Adolescence is a difficult time, one moment striving for independence, and the next moment urgently needing an adult's support.
- Communicate important values. Teens want and need moral guidance from their parents; parents shouldn't hesitate to voice their beliefs.
- Engage in mutually respectful conversations. Avoid dictating – share your feelings, values and attitudes and listen to and learn about theirs.
- Don't make assumptions about a teen being sexually experienced or inexperienced, knowledgeable or naïve. Listen carefully to what your teen is saying and/or asking. Respond to the questions – not to your own fears or worries.
- Respect your teen's ability to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of various options. When they have accurate facts and the opportunity to discuss options with a supportive adult, teens are capable of making mature, responsible decisions.

Information contained in this fact sheet is adapted from resources available through Advocates for Youth (www.advocatesforyouth.org).