



## Let's Talk About . . .

### Tips for Talking with Teens About Sex

Reprinted with permission from *WHY Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen* by David Walsh, Ph.D.

1. **Get motivated.** Some parents don't talk with their teens about sex because they are afraid that it will spark their kids' curiosity or give them ideas, thereby causing them to engage in early sex. The reality is just the opposite. Kids who have good communication with their parents delay sexual activity and are more responsible and safe. Remember, if you don't talk to your teens about sex, someone else will and they probably won't have your values.
2. **Get educated.** There are good books that provide solid information as well as tips for talking with teens about sex. Being well informed builds confidence and helps to overcome the nervousness that many parents feel.
3. **Get comfortable.** Most parents feel uncomfortable discussing sex with their kids. Even if you can't overcome your discomfort, don't hesitate to share that with your kids. It might help to say something like, "You know, it's hard for me to talk with you about sex because we never discussed it when I was growing up. But it's a really important topic, so I'm going to do the best I can." Your kids will appreciate your candor and your interest.
4. **Make it an ongoing conversation.** Don't approach discussions about sex as the "big talk." Look for opportunities to have many shorter conversations, beginning in preteen years and continuing throughout adolescence. Sexual topics come up regularly in the media. Use these to start up short discussions. For example, "Did you see that article in the paper today about how many teens are engaging in oral sex? What did you think of that? Do you think it was realistic based on what's going on in your peer group?"
5. **Don't try to cover too much** in any one discussion. For example you might have a discussion like this with your son about sexual fantasies. "One of the things that happens at your age is that the part of your brain that triggers sexual interest kicks into overdrive. So don't be surprised if you seem obsessed with sexual thoughts and images. That's normal for someone your age."
6. **Choose appropriate times** when you and your teen have some privacy and are not rushed. You'll both be more comfortable.
7. **Discuss sexuality, not just sex.** While it is important for kids to have accurate biological information, they also need to know that a healthy sexual relationship entails respect, caring, and responsibility. You might say something like, "One of the things I try to remember is that sex is just one part of a good relationship. If I'm just out for my own pleasure, then I'm using the other person."
8. **Discuss dating.** For example you might say something like, "It really bothers me the way the media portrays dating. On TV, couples who go out usually end up in bed together. Dating should be a time to get to know someone else and have fun together."

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[Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting](http://www.moappp.org)

1619 Dayton Ave, Suite 111 • St Paul, MN 55104 • 651-644-1447 • fax 651-644-1417 • [www.moappp.org](http://www.moappp.org)

9. **Don't preach.** Teens hate long, drawn-out lectures. Say what you want to say and then let it go. The odds are a lot better that your kids will listen.
10. **Make it a dialogue.** Ask questions and then listen. Try to understand your teen's concerns, questions, and opinions. Don't cut off your adolescent with a statement like, "I don't care what you think, I'm your parent and I know a lot more about this than you do." Teens who hear such comments learn to keep their thoughts to themselves.
11. **Multiple messages are okay.** We can tell our kids why we think it is important to delay sexual relations until they are adults or married while also making sure they have accurate information about safe sex, birth control, HIV/AIDS, and other STDs.
12. **Share your values.** We need to teach our kids that healthy, satisfying relationships include respect and responsibility. We need to teach our sons and daughters that while the changes in their brains increase their interest in sex, we don't want them to rush into sexual behavior. If they work on developing communication and relationship skills, they will be better prepared for the adventure that love brings and the joys that healthy relationships bring.