

Adolescents and Sex

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Many parents, teachers, and others who work with teens wonder how to address the topic of teens and sex. More teens have sex now than in the 1970s. Teens are also younger, on average, when they have sex for the first time. Most Americans (80%) will have sex for the first time between the ages of 10 and 20. Over half of high school seniors report that they have had sex. For this reason, adults need clear information to give children and teens about sex and contraception. Parents especially need to know how and when to talk to their children and teens about sex.

Teens who have sex before age 15 face a number of physical and emotional health risks. They are more likely than other teens to have unprotected sex, to have many sexual partners, to be intoxicated while having sex, and to get a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Most young teens are not ready to deal with the emotions that go along with sexual intercourse. Because they are just beginning to learn about emotional intimacy, they are more likely to have sex with someone they do not know well than with a relationship partner.

Several factors increase the likelihood that a teen will become sexually active:

- Individual—having a history of sexual abuse, depression, heavy alcohol or drug use.
- Family—living in a single parent or step-parent household, living in a poor household, having parents with permissive values about sexual activity, having little supervision from parents, having siblings who are sexually active, feeling unloved, unwanted, or not respected by parents.
- Community—having friends who are sexually active, having few positive experiences at school, living in a neighborhood with poor neighborhood monitoring.

Because many teens will become sexually active before they reach adulthood, parents, schools, and others who work with teens need to know how to help prepare teens to make decisions regarding sexual activity.



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What you can do

Research clearly shows teens are safer and healthier when they get clear, positive messages about sex and protection from their parents, teachers and other caring adults.

As a parent you should:

- Create a trusting, open relationship while children are young so they will feel comfortable coming to you to talk about sexual topics. Ask teens what they think and how they feel about these issues. Be ready to hear things you might not agree with.
- Tell your teen how you feel about him or her becoming sexually active. Make your values clear but don't preach or give ultimatums.
- Speak frankly with teens about waiting to enjoy sex until they are emotionally ready and are in a committed relationship. Emphasize that sex can be a pleasurable experience if it happens in this context.
- Talk honestly with teens about how to protect themselves from STDs and from pregnancy. This is important information for them to have whether they become sexually active as teens or they wait until later.
- Make sure that teens 14 and younger are well supervised. Know where they are and with whom they're spending time. Know the parents of their friends, and be aware of how they are using television and the Internet.

As a teacher you should:

- Create an environment that communicates respect, caring, and high expectations of achievement to students. Very harsh disciplinary policies (i.e. "no tolerance" policies) and a lack of kindness or encouragement leave students feeling undervalued at school.
- Encourage teens to get excited about their future life plans. Help them generate a realistic plan for how to achieve their goals.
- Teach teens what to look for in a partner (respect, kindness, honesty) and how to develop healthy relationship skills. Help teens to recognize the benefits of emotional rather than physical intimacy.
- Recognize that because about 66% of 12th graders and up to 30% of 14-year-olds have already had sexual intercourse, abstinence-only education may not apply to the majority of students. Point out that choices about sexuality may change over time. What may have been right for them at one time may or may

not be right for them in the future. Giving teens the tools to decide what's right for them will help them feel prepared to make these decisions.

- Teach teens how to protect themselves from STDs and pregnancy if and when they decide to become sexually active.

As a community leader you should:

- Provide fun and interesting things for teens to do during the out-of-school hours. Keeping teens engaged in positive activities until parents get home from work is related to later first intercourse.
- Provide support and information for parents who want to talk with their teens about sex.
- Encourage schools to provide both abstinence and safer sex messages to young people.

References:

- Centers for Disease Control (2001). Youth risk behavior surveillance, United States, 2001. Atlanta: CDC.
- SIECUS (1997). But does it work? Improving evaluations of sexuality education. SIECUS Report, 25(6).
- Rosenbaum, E., & Kandel, E. B. (1990). Early onset of adolescent sexual behavior and drug involvement. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52, 783-798.
- Small, S., & Luster, T. (1994). Adolescent sexual activity: An ecological risk-factor approach. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 56, 181-192.

Web Resources:

- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry fact sheet on talking to teens about sex
<http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/62.htm>
- Sexuality Information and Education Council of the US: Resource List of Sexuality Education in the Home
<http://www.siecus.org/pubs/biblio/bibs0011.html>
- Sex, Etc.: A website for teens sponsored by Rutgers University
<http://sxetc.org>