Teens and sexuality

Many parents find it difficult to accept their son or daughter's developing sexuality and try to deny it or put it out of their minds. Others may acknowledge that communication with their teen is important, but simply



ort level to figure out where or how to begin to discuss sexual matters.

Key points to communicate

Although some parents won't talk to their teens about sexual intercourse, the chances are high that your teenage son or daughter will engage in sex. If there is no communication about sexual matters, teens often see their parents' silence as disapproval of both the act and discussion around it. This can lead to excessive secrecy on the teen's part and sometimes to feelings of guilt or shame.

Unfortunately, this secrecy or unfounded shame can make your son or daughter unwilling to risk asking questions in the home, resulting in an increased risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Although any discussion is usually better than no discussion at all, your chances of successful communication are better if you follow some simple tips.

- **Choose your timing carefully.**Don't try to initiate discussion when your teen is racing to get ready for a date.
- **Many parents find it is easier to talk their teen isn't being distracted by the computer, the TV or ringing cell phones.** Since teens often don't wish to make eye contact, driving in the car together can be a good time for discussing difficult subjects such as sexuality.
- In other families, **it's easiest to talk when you're busy doing something together**, such as cooking supper or working in the garden.
- **Try to find a neutral way to lead into the subject.** Talk about a celebrity teen who has become pregnant. Ask what your teen thinks of a new poster about AIDS or an ad for condoms. Lead into the subject from there.
- **Be aware that your teen might use any of the approaches above, or others, to initiate discussion with you.** Be open and ready to take advantage of such opportunities.
- **Once communication is started, listen!** Let your teen talk and ask questions. Follow his or her lead through the conversation.
- **Although you will want to talk about the negative risks associated with sex, talk about the positive aspects, too**, such as the bond that a loving couple can share as well as the sexual pleasures that we enjoy.
- **Don't just talk about the physical act.** Encourage your teen to talk about the emotional feelings involved too.

Messages to communicate

Whatever your personal views about sex before marriage, it is critical to ensure that your teen has easy access to good information about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). It is also important for teens to understand the vital need for mutual respect in all relationships.

- Remind your teen that he or she is in charge of his or her own body and has the ultimate right over it. This means they should never feel pressured into having sex.

- Communicate the principle that there are both good reasons and harmful reasons why men and women have sexual intercourse. Good reasons can include when both parties are equally ready, fully informed and in a loving relationship. Harmful reasons why some people have sexual intercourse may include peer pressure, emotional blackmail ("I'll leave you if you won't do it" and similar threats), impaired judgment due to alcohol or drug use and other reasons involving force or money.

- Reinforce the message that a teen can get pregnant or catch STDs just as easily from the first act of sexual intercourse as from any other.

- Discuss the fact that anybody, no matter how clean, well-groomed, intelligent or well brought up they are can still catch STDs and can still pass them on. Protection is important.

Regardless of your personal views about sex before marriage, it's important to keep the lines of communication with your teen open about all subjects—especially around difficult subjects like sex and sexuality. Make sure that your teen has easy access to good information about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and that they understand the importance of mutual respect in all relationships. By keeping the lines of communication open now, you lay the foundation for a strong, life-long relationship.