

A warm, golden-toned photograph of a family of three—a father, a mother, and a young child—gathered around a book. They are all looking down at the pages with interest and care. The father is on the left, the mother on the right, and the child is in the center. The lighting is soft and intimate, suggesting a quiet time at home.

pointers for parents

AMERICAN PARENTS AND THEIR ADOLESCENTS
OVERWHELMINGLY AGREE THAT SEXUAL ISSUES
SHOULD BE TAUGHT IN THE HOME ■ HOWEVER,
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HELPFUL CONVERSATION ABOUT SEX
WITH THEIR PARENTS



BEGINNING "THE TALK"

The earlier you start communicating with your children about sexuality and their bodies, the more impact you will have. You will then feel more comfortable when the discussions become more detailed.

Age Group: 2 – 6 years old

Use correct terms when discussing your children's "private parts" (genitals).

- Be careful that your words and tone of voice are positive.
 - Never scold if you find your children touching private parts. You can easily redirect their attention to something else.
1. As you become comfortable using appropriate terms for private parts you can look for opportunities to start conversations with your children.
 - Some examples would be, talking about why mommy sits on the potty and daddy can stand. Talk about why sibling's genitalia look different.
 - Discuss inappropriate touching.
 - Explain to your children how a bathing suit covers areas that are "private."
 2. Tell your child that there may be strangers or even people they know who may try to touch or look at private parts. Tell your child to tell you or another trusted adult if anyone tries to touch or look at their private areas. Parents can then make the decision about whether the situation was warranted (ie., a doctor's exam or a teacher or relative assisting your child in the restroom)

Age Group: Early Elementary School

By this time you and your children should be comfortable with discussing many topics, including physical health. Your children will now be more aware of male/female differences and will gradually be exposed to sexual issues through media and friends.

1. Your children will pick up on your attitude about the sexual issues they are exposed to in the media. When they bring up something they've heard that's sex-related, take a deep breath

and listen carefully. Remember, you want to use this time to open the doors of communication so you can help clarify your family's values and expectations. When your children ask a sexual question, be sure you understand what they are asking. For instance, if a child asks where he comes from, confirm that this is a biological question and not a geographical one.

2. Be specific but do not give more details than your child can handle at his level of maturity. Your child may be satisfied with simple answers at first, such as a baby comes from a mommy and daddy. As your child becomes more curious, you will need to provide additional details. Also, have age-appropriate books about reproduction available in your home that support your family's values.

Age Group: Middle School

By this time your child is consistently exposed to sexual issues. They are inundated via the media and friends. With real-life television programs and music promoting multiple sex partners and frequent sexual activity as the norm, your child is over-loaded with misconceptions about sex.

1. Be direct and more detailed on the information you discuss. For instance, youth often believe that oral sex is not "sex" and they cannot contract a sexually transmitted disease that way. Pointed discussions on oral sex and the consequences of having sexual relations before marriage are crucial at this age.
2. Make sure your child is clear on your values regarding sexual issues.
3. Be clear and specific about your expectations of your child's behavior when dating or "hanging out" with the opposite sex. Include conversations on the dangers of date-rape drugs.
4. Your child must be confident that he/she is free to come to you if he/she becomes sexually active or upset over a bad choice.

As parents, you have an enormous responsibility to protect their children from emotional and physical danger. Though sex-related issues are among the most difficult to discuss, they are also the most critically important to the health and well-being of your children.

According to many scientific surveys and studies, American parents and their adolescents overwhelmingly agree that sexual issues should be taught in the home. However, over one-third of adolescents recently surveyed say they have never had a helpful conversation about sex with their parents! If you were a parent taking part in this survey which category would you fall into? Many parents plan to talk about sex with their children but somehow just never manage to bring up the subject. They often fear their children know more than they do and feel unprepared or even unqualified to discuss sexual issues. The reality is, your child *will* learn about sex, either from you, or from someone else. This book is designed to help you be the teacher for your children.

1. Clearly communicate your values and expectations about sex and intimacy.

As your child grows, explain how you make decisions based on your values. Explain what it means to have self-control. Use life as a springboard for conversations. Keep your eyes open for images and cultural examples to reinforce what your family believes about various behaviors. Set high standards for your child's behavior based on your personal values and those of your faith community. Tell your child what you believe they are capable of; their actions will often rise to meet your expectations.

2. Make sure your actions match your words.

It is important to model positive relationships and healthy habits, not just talk about them. Your child will respect your opinions and advice the most if you are a good role model.

3. Make an effort to build “connectedness” with your child.

Spend time getting to know your child. Find out about her passions. Identify the issues that motivate her. Find new ways to learn things

together (don't just expect your child to pick up your hobbies). By entering your child's world, you will form the foundations of a relationship that shows you can be trusted and that you care.

4. Be accessible, approachable and willing to listen.

Showing respect for your child by listening is a good way to open up communication. Active listening is a difficult skill for many parents. Show your child the same respect you show your best friends when they talk. Affirm him; let him know you're listening. Make yourself available for conversations on his timeframe. You can't force kids to tell you things if they feel you don't have time for them. If you haven't been talking to your child, start by listening to the little things. Over time, you will build trust to talk about the more important things. Remember, you may be your child's parent but that doesn't give you permanent access to his heart. Let your child know that you care. Also, be honest about your answers and if you don't know something, say so.

5. Remember your child's world is very different than the world you grew up in as an adolescent.

Today's adolescents face greater risks than their parents did. There are more pressures to engage in many different sexual activities (including oral sex). There are also more sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and some of them are incurable. It is important to stay connected to your child and seek to understand their world. By doing so, you can identify ways to positively impact their lives.

6. Be involved in your child's school.

Do you know what your children are learning about sex in school? Find out when presentations will be given at your child's school and ask for information about the presentation; or ask to review the materials that will be used. If you don't feel this information is appropriate, find a healthy, positive alternative curriculum and encourage the instructor and administration to use it. If you don't agree with the presentation, talk with your child about ways to excuse him from class without embarrassing him in front of his peers. Remember, you are the authority in your child's life, especially concerning values, including sexuality.

7. Remember that sex is good and hormones are real.

Curiosity about sex will not go away if it is never discussed. In fact, avoiding the subject can make sex seem even more mysterious and exciting. Be sure to balance discussions by talking about the positive aspects of sex within marriage as well as the responsibilities that come with it.

8. Point out the positive.

There is a direct link between low self-esteem and high-risk behaviors such as drug use, early sexual involvement, and other self-destructive behaviors. Compliment your children when they are doing what is right and help them set positive goals for the future. Help your children build self-esteem based on character, unique talents and positive accomplishments. Make sure to show your appreciation and pride for all they do *right* before offering constructive criticism about what to avoid. When they make mistakes, talk about how to earn back your trust. Never leave them feeling hopeless.

9. Give your child good reasons for making positive, healthy choices.

Adolescents tend to make decisions based on feelings instead of logic and experiences. Often, they believe they know everything and can be hurt by nothing. Their attitude is, "I need it now!" If we want adolescents to make good decisions about their futures, we must give them practical reasons they can relate to for making choices that will lead to health and happiness. For example, it's hard to run track if you're six months pregnant. If your children have made poor decisions, encourage them to start over and move in a more positive direction.

10. Know the facts and share them in a positive way.

Attempting to influence your child's behavior by focusing on guilt and fear may have the opposite effect – rebellion. Instead, know the facts about teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and puberty, and share them with your child through-out his life. Parents should set high standards, but make sure they are realistic. Expect your child to succeed, but create a relationship where he knows that he will still be loved even if he fails.