

Talking to Parents About Adolescent Sexuality



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KEYWORDS

• Adolescent • Sexuality • Communication • Parent • Prevention

KEY POINTS

- Parents are an influential source of information about sexuality to their adolescents and have the ability to shape these values and behaviors.
- Parents should communicate comprehensive, medically accurate information to their teens.
- Parents should incorporate discussions about positive aspects of sexuality, such as pleasure, satisfaction, and intimacy, into these conversations.
- There are resources available for providers, parents, and teens for information, guidance, and support, and the major ones are highlighted here.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of parents, guardians, and other caregivers (henceforth referred to as “parents,” but inclusive of the adults who function in a parenting role) in all aspects of adolescent development cannot be overstated, but their role in sexual education is crucial. Parents are the single largest influence on their adolescents’ decisions about sex, and parents underestimate the impact they have on their decisions.¹ For most parents and their children, the prospect of talking about topics related to sexuality creates anxiety and apprehension, and this may lead to avoidance of discussions (**Table 1** provides a list of common sources of anxiety associated with talking about sexuality).

Parents may also delay conversations about sexuality because they are afraid of putting ideas into their child’s head before they are “ready” or because they equate talking about sexuality with giving tacit permission to explore sexual behaviors. In fact, sex education and parent-child communication about sexuality are associated with delayed sexual activity and more consistent contraceptive use.^{2–4} Conversations with parents

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Table 1	
Sources of anxiety for parents and teens when discussing sexuality	
Sources of Anxiety for Parents	Sources of Anxiety for Teens
Real or perceived ignorance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not knowing the answers • Not knowing the correct language to use/ sounding crude • Being wrong or corrected • Having different answers than other parent or adult 	Real or perceived ignorance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not knowing the correct language to use/ sounding crude • Not knowing the right questions to ask • Being wrong or corrected
Saying too much <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing more information than your child is ready for • Revealing too much personal information (TMI) • Revealing family secrets • Disclosure of abuse (of self or another) 	Saying too much <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revealing sexual thoughts or behaviors to the parent that might elicit criticism or punishment • Disclosure of abuse (of self or another)
Fear of difficult questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About how babies are made • About contraception, fertility, abortion, pregnancy, and so forth • About parent's own adolescent behaviors or adult sexuality • About prior relationships, separation, divorce, or death • About abuse experiences • About the sexuality spectrum 	Fear of difficult questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions about current sexual behavior • Questions about abuse • Questions about the sexuality spectrum
Finding out something unknown about child <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is already sexually active, uses contraception, or had an abortion • Has experienced abuse or vulnerability to abuse • Is LGBTQIA • Has been exposed to pornography • Has "sexted" or sent explicit language or photos via social media 	Finding out something unknown about parent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About their current or past sex life • A negative family secret • Disclosure of abuse
Fear of teen's reaction/perception <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sounding stupid • Sounding "old-fashioned" or out of touch • Teen will not be open to the conversation/ topic • Disclosure of abuse 	Fear of parent's reaction/perception <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sounding stupid • Parent will not be open to the conversation/topic • Asking something that shocks, offends, or angers the parent • Asking something the parent refuses to answer • Disclosure of abuse
Discomfort with topic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embarrassment • Shame • Fear 	Discomfort with topic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embarrassment • Shame • Fear

have the potential to become the benchmarks against which teens measure other information about sexuality and serve as a buffer against early sexual activity.

Unfortunately, in many instances, "sex talks" between parents and their children are less than optimal. Parents tend to exclude positive topics associated with

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