



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 41

How to Have the Birds and Bees Conversation with Your Teen

In some cases, by the time teens have the talk about sex and relationships, they have already been sexually active. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 47% of high school students reported having sexual intercourse in 2013. According to the Guttmacher Institute, almost 615,000 women between the ages of 15 and 19 become pregnant each year in the United States — the lowest rate since the peak of teen pregnancy in 1990, which can be attributed to greater access to resources, including information about sexual health, as well as contraceptives. It's important to foster open discussion with your teen about sexual and reproductive health to ensure they are making safe decisions on their own.

When to Bring Up the Topic

Kids are going to learn the basics from peers, TV programs, movies, etc., so don't be surprised when they tell you they already know everything you are saying. Even if they think they know everything, there is still a lot you need to teach them, and you have to be able to guide them in their decisions.

Although having the dreaded talk is usually associated with teens, it is recommended to start talking to your children about sex and sexuality from a young age. Get them comfortable with the subject, so when the conversation becomes more serious later and also starts to touch on relationships, they will be more open to talking with you. Teens who report having frequent conversations with parents about sex are far more likely to have fewer partners, use protection, and even delay sexual activity altogether.

Look for Easy Opportunities

Understand that having a thorough talk about HIV, STDs, and pregnancy prevention is crucial, but it is even more important to build the line of communication about these topics. Look for opportunities to bring them up. Maybe you both pass a young pregnant teen in the mall. Casually ask them their views later. Alternately, if you are watching a

movie where a teen gets physically abused by a partner or finds out they have an STD, you should talk to your teen about it. They may have questions that they don't know how to bring up to you.

Tips for Talking About Sex

Whether you are having a mini conversation or an in-depth discussion, these tips will help you make the most of this valuable time.

- **Don't preach:** Simply telling your teen not to do something is likely going to get you an "okay" answer just to make you happy. It may even make them want to do it more. Giving orders is just not effective, and they will be less likely to come to you when they do have questions or need help. Telling your teen to practice abstinence and not having a conversation about sexual health more broadly doesn't work. According to the Guttmacher Institute, contraceptives contributed to an 86% decline in teen pregnancies between 1995 and 2002, whereas abstinence accounted for just 14%.
- **Make sure they know they are normal:** Teens are curious, and it's only natural that they have an increased interest in sex. Let them know their emotions are normal. Far too often, teens carry around unnecessary feelings of guilt, shame, and regret that they shouldn't have to deal with on their own. Your support as a parent and openness to discussing the subject is most important.
- **Be comfortable:** Your teen can't possibly be comfortable talking to you about sex if you come across as the most uncomfortable person on the planet when a sexual topic comes up. It goes back to talking to them starting from a young age. Doing so is not just for their benefit; it gives you the opportunity to have plenty of practice getting comfortable before the topic gets a little more serious.
- **Discuss pregnancy and STDs:** It is easy to tell your kids not to have sex because of the risk of pregnancy and STDs. It is more important, though, to provide your teens with resources to avoid pregnancy and STDs outside of abstinence-only conversations. Teens should know that there are contraceptive options available, from birth control pills to hormonal IUDs to condoms. They should also know that it is important to use condoms during any sexual activity, not just to prevent pregnancy, but also the spread of STDs. Fostering open discussion about sex and reproductive health is important.
- **Skip the third degree:** You don't want your teen to feel like they are in trouble every time the subject gets brought up. Parents often transition from conversation to interrogation without realizing it. Be mindful to avoid this kind of questioning.
- **Listen:** Let them talk. Even if you don't like what they are saying, they need to know that their voice matters. Your child should have the chance to discuss what's on their mind because it gives them agency, autonomy, and values their concerns. Let them talk because they are new to sex and relationships, and show them they can open up to you, so that if they have a concern later on, they will feel comfortable coming to you. The most important thing you can do is

make sure your teen knows they can turn to you with any questions they have, or if they need help.

- **Cover all topics:** At some point, you should have conversations about a wide range of sexual issues. Pregnancy and STDs are important subjects, but also make sure you touch on self-image, peer pressure, rape and date rape, body language, sexual orientation, fertility, oral sex, masturbation, and birth control.

Talking About Relationships

Quite often, sex is easier to talk about than relationships. Some parents are so concerned with talking about sex that they forget this topic. Many teens have unhealthy relationships, and according to the Office of Disease Prevention and Healthy Promotion, at least 10 percent of teens admit they have been physically or sexually abused by someone they have dated, which doesn't even account for mental and emotional abuse. Important topics to discuss include:

- **Characteristics of a Healthy Relationship:** Both people will feel supported, valued, and respected. They have interests and friends outside the relationship, and disagreements are settled with honest and open communication. Good times should more than outweigh the bad ones.
- **Unhealthy Relationship Characteristics:** One person makes all the decisions and/or tries to change or control the other. One or both parties drop their interests and friends outside of the relationships. One may make fun of the other's interests or opinions. During an argument, one or both yell, hit, threaten, or throw things. One person may demand the other's focus and constantly check in by texting or calling.
- **Dating Violence:** Romantic relationships can turn abusive, and it's important for your child to know what kind of behavior is inappropriate in a romantic partnership. Talk to your teen about stalking, as well as emotional, sexual, and physical abuse. Let them know that being with someone who is jealous, possessive, or controlling can put them at greater risk of violence, and if they find themselves in a situation of domestic violence, that they can always come to you for support. There is also support and information available to you and your child at the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

Helpful Tips

You teach your kids a lot with your own relationships. Your behavior needs to match the values you are encouraging. You want to give them more freedom and independence as they mature, but they still need boundaries. Set dating rules. Make sure you meet the person they are dating, and be sure they know they can always call you to pick them up, no matter the time or location. Most importantly, treat your teen with respect. It will make communication easier, and it will help you build a healthy relationship with them.

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