

Hey, What Do I Say?

A PARENT TO PARENT GUIDE ON HOW
TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY



Dedication

This booklet is dedicated to the Adult Role Models—past, present, and future—for their commitment to help parents and other caring adults throughout New York City improve their communication about sexuality and build strong relationships with their children.

AUTHORS

FIRST EDITION

Darlene Adamson, *Adult Role Model*
Ana Clemente, *Adult Role Model*
Wanda Little, *Adult Role Model*
Lesley Moody, *Adult Role Model*
Miriam Simms, *Adult Role Model*
Michele Bayley, *Associate Vice President of Education and Training*

SECOND EDITION

Sweeney Anderson, *Adult Role Model*
Dennis Barton, *Adult Role Model*
Beverly Bell, *Adult Role Model*
Luz Beniquez, *Adult Role Model*
Camille Bodiford, *Adult Role Model*
Elizabeth Butler, *Adult Role Model*
Cindy Chung, *Adult Role Model*
Judy Forbin-Morain, *Adult Role Model*
Sandra Granizo Cruz, *Adult Role Model*
Yvette Harris, *Adult Role Model*
Wanda Little, *Adult Role Model*
Rosa Ocampo, *Adult Role Model*
Crystal Parker, *Adult Role Model*
Patricia Rhodie, *Adult Role Model*
Justina Roberts, *Adult Role Model*
Diane Smith, *Adult Role Model*
Bernice Sutton, *Adult Role Model*
Randa Dean, *Associate Director of Adult Education*
Amanda Perez, *Director of Adult Education and Professional Training*
Lori McCarthy, *Adult Role Models Program Assistant*
Jennifer Thibodeau, *Adult Role Models Program Assistant*

EDITOR

Sherrill Cohen

A Publication of Planned Parenthood of New York City

Margaret Sanger Square
26 Bleecker Street
New York, New York 10012-2413
Tel: 212-274-7200
Fax: 212-274-7300
www.ppnyc.org

Joan Malin, *President and Chief Executive Officer*
Haydeé Morales, *Vice President of Education, Training, and Margaret Sanger Center International*
Michele Bayley, *Associate Vice President of Education and Training*

All photos are for illustrative purposes only.

Photography: Jaweer Brown

Second Edition

© 2009 Planned Parenthood of New York City.
All Rights Reserved.



Introduction

Talking to the children in your life about **sexuality** is a lifelong process, and this guide can help you to start or continue that process!

As parents, we know we have all received different messages about sexuality. Some of us may or may not have received education about sexuality from our own parents. Regardless of what we were taught when we were young, it's important to give our children accurate information, along with our family values, in order to help them make healthy decisions about sexuality.

With the high rates of sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and unplanned pregnancy among teens in the United States, we know that children need information about sexual and reproductive health from trusted sources. And with too many potentially untrustworthy sources on TV, in movies, and on the Internet, parents are needed more than ever to be the primary and most trusted sexuality educators of their children. We realize that for some parents, figuring out how to do this can be tricky. That's where the Adult Role Models program comes in.

In 1998, Planned Parenthood of New York City (PPNYC) created the Adult Role Models (ARM) program to help parents learn skills and techniques to keep the lines of communication open with their children about sexuality. As Adult Role Models, we've undergone extensive training that showed us how to speak openly and honestly with our children about sexuality and use techniques to improve communication with our children.

We hope the information, skills, and techniques in this guide will make it easier for other parents and caring adults to share accurate information and their family values with the children in their lives. Talking to the children in your life about sexuality is a lifelong process, and this guide can help you to start or continue that process. Good luck!

— PPNYC Adult Role Models

Talking to Children about Sexuality...

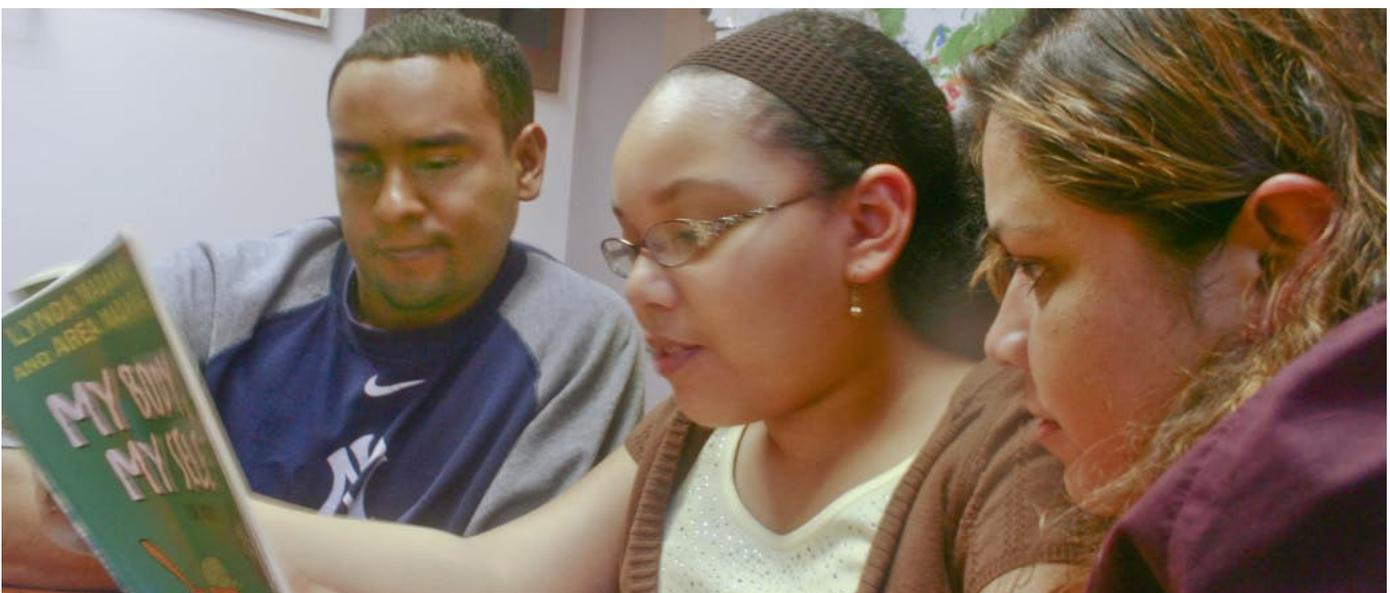
Based on our own experience and what we hear from other parents, the main **barriers** that prevent us from openly talking to our kids about sexuality are:



Whatever the reason that holds us back, the bottom line is that **our children need to have us talk to them about sexuality**. We want to be the ones they come to for advice and guidance. Let's be real: it can be difficult to talk about sexuality in general. Talking to our children about sexuality just takes it up a notch!

So, if you are a parent who is uncomfortable talking about sexuality or a parent who is comfortable but can use some more tips, we are here to share information and techniques to help you get your message across to your children.

This guide answers questions that we've been asked by parents of children who range from infants to adults. You may find that you have some of the same questions or that you can learn something new that will open up the lines of communication even more.



Before we answer some of the most common questions we hear from parents, **we have to clear up some of the myths** that can get in the way of open communication with children about sexuality.



True or False?

TRUE OR FALSE: Parents have to know a lot about sexuality before they can begin to talk with their children about it.

FALSE! Although it is great to learn as much as you can about sexuality, you do not need all the answers to begin talking with your children. Just letting your children know they can come to you with their questions and concerns will help them to feel more comfortable talking with you about sexuality, which is a huge step in the right direction.

It is always okay to admit you do not know or are not sure of the answer to a question. After being honest about what you do and do not know, you can look it up and get back to them with an answer. Or better yet, look it up together! On Pages 18–20, we've listed some resources that can help you to find out more information about sexuality, including resources that you and your children can use together.

TRUE OR FALSE: Talking to children about sexuality will encourage them to have sexual intercourse earlier.

FALSE! We hear this all the time and we can definitely understand parents' concerns about this issue because none of us want to encourage our children to experiment with sexual intercourse early. The good news is that studies have shown that when parents talk with their children about sexuality—providing accurate information and sharing their values—their children are **more likely to delay sexual intercourse and use protection when they do have sex.**

True or False?

In fact, our conversations with our children about sexuality should go beyond how to take care of one's body, how to abstain from sex, and how to use protection. They should also include:

- The importance of feeling good about oneself.
- How to have healthy, respectful relationships.
- Clear messages from you about your values and expectations about sexual decisions.

With this information, our children are better prepared to resist peer pressure and other influences and to make healthy decisions.

TRUE OR FALSE: Children want to talk to their parents about sexuality.

TRUE! Young people **do** want to talk to their parents about sexuality; many just fear their parents' reaction. (Think for a moment about when you were in their shoes.)

As a parent, you can help your children to feel comfortable talking to you about sexuality by answering their questions openly and honestly. It is important for you to use a calm, encouraging tone of voice, to be patient, and to be willing to listen, even if you are shocked by what they say.

Still don't believe us? In a recent survey by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, teens said that parents (not friends or the media) **most** influence their decisions about sex! That's great news.

TRUE OR FALSE: Teens who ask their parents questions about sex are probably sexually active.

FALSE! Not necessarily so. Many teens ask questions about sex because they are curious and want to know their parents' views and values.

We know that messages about sex are everywhere: television, movies, videos, the Internet, and music. Often the messages that teens receive from the media and other sources are unrealistic, unhealthy, or confusing. Trust us: you probably have different values than those you see in many of the music videos and talk shows on daytime TV. If you don't know what we mean, sit through a few music videos and talk shows—you'll get the point!

So, when your child asks you a question about sex, try to remain calm (take a deep breath if you have to) and resist making assumptions or jumping to conclusions. Many teens say that the biggest barrier to talking to their parents about sex is that they think their parents will assume that they are sexually active. Don't make that mistake.

Questions and Answers

Here they are—the **12** most common questions that parents ask about how to talk to kids about sexuality.

1. When should I start talking to my child about sexuality?

You may not realize it, but you have probably already given your child a lot of information about sexuality. Giving a child information about his/her body and what it means to be a boy or girl is talking about sexuality! Sexuality is related to much more than you may think, including:

Anatomy and reproductive health—Biological sex, puberty, menstruation, contraception, safer sex, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV, pregnancy, childbirth, hygiene, and general health care.

Gender identity and gender role—How we see ourselves as male or female, and how we're taught that men and women should act.

Relationships—Behaviors, expectations, satisfaction, and abuse.

Love and affection—How we express love and affection to friends, family, and romantic partners.

Body image—How we feel about our bodies, how we treat our bodies, and how attractive we feel.



Values

Our values are personal beliefs that affect how we think, feel, and act. Values can change over time with new knowledge and life experiences.

Some values that we want to teach our kids may come easy to us because we feel strongly about them, while others may need more thought. One way that you can start to think about your values is to look at the definition of sexuality in Question 1 and come up with a value that you would like to teach your children for each component of sexuality.

Sexual orientation—Physical and emotional attraction to a man, woman, or both.

Sensuality and pleasure—Accepting and enjoying our own bodies and accepting and enjoying the bodies of our sexual partner(s).

Sexual activity—Acts of intimacy such as hugging, kissing, touching, and sexual intercourse.

You may have already started speaking with your children about at least a few of these components of sexuality. It's important to remember that **sexuality is more than just sex and that each component is equally important**.

As your child becomes older, you will continue to teach him or her about sexuality, through role-modeling and verbal communication as well as body language.

For example, if your child starts playing with his or her genitals while sitting on the toilet, how you respond sends a message that may affect his or her body image in a positive or negative manner. If you get upset or show anger, your child may get the idea that the genitals are a bad or dirty part of the body.

After considering all that makes up sexuality, it is easy to see how talking and teaching about sexuality is a lifelong process. Talking with your children about sexuality should not be limited to a one-time event. Keep reading and you'll find more tips and techniques to help you to effectively communicate the information and values that you want your child to learn.

2. How do I answer my child's questions about sexuality?

One of the great things about teaching our children about sexuality is that they often keep us on our toes by asking questions. When your child asks you a question, try to remain calm and answer the question. By remaining calm and **not avoiding** the question, you are sending your child the message that you are open to talking about sexuality. This will enable your child to become comfortable talking with you about sexuality and to continue to come to you for answers.

A lot of parents worry more about exactly what they will say when asked a sexuality question, instead of **how** to say it. Your tone is just as important, if not more so, than what you say. A child will more vividly remember your warm, welcoming tone than the content of what you said.

When answering your child's question, be sure to give your child **accurate information** while also letting him or her know your **views and values**. When you think about it, who could be better to teach your child values about sexuality than you!



Keep your answers brief and uncomplicated. Start with a simple answer and give your child more information if he or she continues to ask more questions. If you happen to ramble (as we tend to do when caught off guard) or give your child incorrect information, you can always go back and clarify. And remember, if you don't know the answer, it's okay to admit you don't know, then look it up, and get back to your child. Teaching your child about sexuality is an ongoing process.

Here are four basic steps for answering your child's questions about sexuality that we suggest and have regularly used ourselves. These steps will help you to give your child the right amount of information and share your views and values. In addition, these steps give you some stalling time so that you can communicate effectively.

STEP 1. Normalize and validate the child's question and then ask the child why he or she is asking you this question: "That's a really good question. How come you're asking that today?" This step reassures the child that his or her question is normal. It will also give you a sense of what caused your child to ask that question and where he or she is getting information (Did he or she see something or hear something? Who was involved?).

STEP 2. Ask your child what he or she thinks the answer is: "What do you think?" This gives you an idea of what your child already knows and the sort of language he or she uses to express it.

STEP 3. Answer the question honestly based on the child's response and your values. Take advantage of the opportunity to introduce your views and values as well as to give your child honest, accurate information about his/her question.

STEP 4. Ask the child if he or she understands the answer: "Does that answer your question?" This step allows a parent to make sure the child understood the answer. Try different words or resources if your child doesn't understand the first time.



The Four Steps Really Work!

I was walking through my house... and out of nowhere my daughter says to me “Mom, do you get horny?” I wanted to keep walking, but I stopped and did the 4 steps with her.

The first question broke the ice: “Why are you asking that question today?” She began to explain that her friends are always saying they are horny and that she didn’t feel that way. She wondered if there was something wrong with her. After I knew where she was coming from, we were able to have a great talk and I was able to reassure her and share my values with her.

— *Crystal*

We suggest that you also use “Teachable Moments” to educate your child about sexuality. Teachable Moments are everyday opportunities that can be used to talk to our children about sexuality and other tough topics without seeming obvious. During Teachable Moments, you may come across issues related to sexuality and then engage your child in conversation while:

- Watching television and movies
- Listening to music
- Looking at an Internet site
- Talking about personal experiences and other people’s experiences (family members, friends, etc.)
- Reading the newspaper or magazines

The most important part of Teachable Moments is asking your child what he or she thinks about a sexuality issue and then being ready to listen! That way, you can share your thoughts and values with your child after hearing what he or she thinks.

Here’s an example of how you can use a Teachable Moment. You and your pre-teen child are watching a television show. In one scene the characters are passionately kissing and, bam, they end up having sex. During a commercial or after the show is over, you can start a conversation with your child by asking **what he or she thinks** about the couple having sex. Then you can follow up with one or two more specific questions such as:

Do you think that situation was realistic?

Do you think they were ready to have sex?

How do you think having sex might affect their relationship?

What are some of the consequences that they may have to deal with?

Did they protect themselves against unplanned pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted infections?

Did the couple know each other well enough to have sex?

Did they act responsibly?

Do you believe that only people who are in love or married should have sex?

They just might ask...

If your child hasn't asked you a sexuality question, chances are he or she will. In addition to using the four steps to answer your child's questions, you may want to think in advance about your answers to some of the common "kid" questions.

For example: Where do babies come from? What's sex? Do you have sex? Why do boys and girls look different? Why is my body different from yours? If these questions make you anxious, there are a lot of resources available for parents that can help you to simplify information for your child according to his/her age or stage of development. *See our list of resources on Pages 18–20.*

In my culture, we never used the word "vagina." However, after my ARM training, I realized how important it was to use the proper terms and to teach my daughter to do the same. After I became an ARM, my mom participated in one of my workshops and now she knows why proper terms are important and she uses them with my daughter too!

—Luz

For more on Teachable Moments, see # 6 in Questions and Answers on Page 10.

After you have listened to your child's thoughts and feelings, you can then share your thoughts concerning the situation, including your values on sexual activity and dating. Many times during a Teachable Moment, parents will realize they have a lot in common with their children, and often a parent will simply need to affirm his/her child's thoughts and feelings because their values are already in agreement.

3. Aren't words like "penis" and "vulva" too complicated for pre-schoolers to understand?

No, the words "penis" [PEE-niss] and "vulva" [VUL-vah]* really aren't that complicated for children to understand. The fact is, we teach our children even more complicated words such as "stomach" and "shoulders." We tend to feel less comfortable talking about the genitals compared to other parts of the body because we relate genitals to sex. Really, **genitals are just another part of the body.**

Teaching your children the correct names for their genitals gives them a couple of advantages. First, it encourages a healthy and positive attitude toward their body. Secondly, because nicknames for genitals tend to be specific to the family ("pee-pee," "wee-wee," and "down there" to name a few), teaching your children the correct names for their genitals will give them language they can use to express themselves clearly. This becomes particularly important in a medical situation and in reports of abuse.

**The "vulva" is the entire area of a female's genitals. Although the vulva is commonly called the "vagina," the vagina is actually the canal stretching from the vaginal opening to the cervix.*

4. Should I talk to my girls and boys differently about sexuality?

Both boys and girls need the **same important information** to become healthy adults. It is important for both boys and girls to understand their own body's development as well as the development of the other sex.

Both boys and girls also need to know that sexual feelings are normal, how to take care of their bodies, how to protect themselves from disease and unplanned pregnancy, and how to have healthy, respectful relationships. Both boys and girls can become infected with a sexually transmitted infection, including HIV. They can also both experience the stresses and consequences of an unplanned pregnancy or an STI. **The more information your children have, the more choices are available to them to stay safe.**



One parent in a workshop thought that her young son was watching “sex movies” on TV because he was waking up with an erection every morning. I was able to explain to her that it was just a normal part of development that her son was experiencing. She was relieved, and I felt good that I could help her and know that she would be able to support her son through his sexual development.

— Bernice

5. What’s the harm in telling children myths about where they come from? Don’t we tell them “myths” about Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy?

Let’s think about myths—they’re false or half-accurate information that can create confusion or fantasies. As your child’s most important and first sexuality educator, you want to provide your child with actual facts so that he or she will see you as a [reliable source of information](#).

Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy are fairy tales that can be fun for both parents and children. These myths [cannot](#) lead to health consequences such as unplanned pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections; but lack of information about sexuality [can](#).

6. My child avoids conversations about sexuality. How can I make my child comfortable talking to me about sexuality?

Some children feel uncomfortable talking about sexuality, and that’s okay. In order to create a comfortable environment without seeming pushy, you may want to talk with your child about something that interests him or her and relate that topic to sexuality.

We also recommend that parents [take advantage of the Teachable Moments mentioned previously](#), such as listening to music, watching television, looking at Internet sites, etc., to start a conversation about sexuality and to keep the lines of communication open. To use a Teachable Moment, find issues that are relevant to your child. Then [ask](#) your child to share his or her feeling about the issue by asking, “What do you think about that?” Teachable Moments can help you to find out your child’s views and will give you the opportunity to share your own thoughts and values in a more subtle way. Most importantly, you want your child to know that you are approachable and open to discussions about sexuality.

Other Important Tips for a Successful Teachable Moment

- Show interest in his or her thoughts and feelings.
- Avoid distractions when listening to and speaking with your child.
- Don't interrupt when your child is speaking to you.
- Try not to react by getting angry or upset or by making assumptions.
- Answer your child's questions openly and honestly.
- Keep the conversation private if your child asks you to do so.
- Don't give up. Every time you try, it sends the message that you care and are open to talking about sexuality.

For pre-teens, body image is so important. So many of my daughter's classmates have begun to menstruate and develop breasts that my daughter began to worry that there was something wrong with her. Although we would like our children to appreciate their uniqueness, I could understand her concern. I used magazines and books to illustrate how bodies develop differently and encouraged her to appreciate the beauty of her body going through its changes.

— Sandra

7. My child is starting to develop. How do I help my child to deal with puberty and body changes?

Preparing children for puberty before they begin to develop makes it easier for them to make the transition. It also helps you to get in touch with the fact that one day your “baby” will start to look more like an adult.

But, if your child has already started to develop, we recommend that you let him or her know that **the process is normal and healthy**, and that **each person develops at his or her own pace**. You may have to repeat this a few times because kids' self-esteem can be very fragile at this age. You want to make sure that you give your child information about the changes he or she is going through and what to expect at each stage of development. If you don't feel confident guiding your child through puberty on your own, there is a lot of information available through libraries, videos, and the Internet. (*See Pages 18–20 for a list of resources.*)

Another way that you can help your child to deal with the changes of puberty is to **avoid teasing** or publicly commenting about your child's body changes (and also instruct other family members to do the same). Teasing and public comments can cause embarrassment, shut down future communication with your child, and affect your child's self-esteem.

Try to remember how you felt during puberty. We encourage parents to take off their “adult glasses” when communicating with their children about puberty and other sensitive sexuality topics. Try to see their questions and experiences through their eyes and in the context of their age and stage of development. If we don't take off the “adult glasses,” we may forget that their worries about puberty and body changes are perfectly normal and appropriate for their age.

Lastly, be prepared for your child to experience a range of emotions and interact with you differently during puberty and adolescence. Some kids withdraw a bit, some express very intense emotions, and others go back and forth. You may feel that you do not even recognize your own child! This is a time when your child will be adjusting to physical changes as well as developing his or her own identity and testing limits (although this can be a pain in the you-know-what, it is totally normal).

Continue to talk to your child about his or her feelings and experiences, because it is important that you remain connected to what's happening in his or her life. And, remember, even if your child is trying to pull away, don't take it personally.

When my oldest daughter had her first kiss, at fourteen years old, she talked to me about it. I was really glad to see that she felt comfortable enough to confide in me. She shared with me how she felt both physically and emotionally. I took advantage of that moment to talk with her about kissing and relationships. Looking back, I realize how important it is to have open communication with your children about sexuality.

— Wanda



On one occasion I walked into my bedroom to find my nine-year-old masturbating on my bed. We were both surprised; she because I found her and I because I didn't think she was masturbating yet. Later, I explained that masturbation is normal, but needs to be done in the privacy of her room.

— Luz

8. My child has had a “first kiss.” How do I talk to my child about relationships and setting boundaries?

Although it may set off an alarm in parents, it is perfectly normal for young people to begin experimenting with kissing and touching. As parents, we can help our children to deal with the emotions involved in receiving and giving affection and setting boundaries.

We recommend that you begin by having a conversation with your child about the feelings that go along with kissing. Ask your child, with an **open mind**, how the kiss made him or her feel. This is a good time to introduce your values concerning kissing, touching, and relationships. You may want to help your child practice what he or she can do and say in different situations to set limits. For example, ask your child: “If your friend wants to do more than kissing, how would you handle that?” Again, **an open mind makes for an open conversation**.

9. How do I encourage my children to abstain from sex when there is so much pressure around them to have sex?

As parents, this can be an intimidating issue for us...but we don't have to feel defeated. Parents are powerful. Sometimes we just have to remind ourselves that **we do influence our children**.

So, even though there is pressure out there to have sex, your message can sink in. Recent studies have shown that when parents give clear messages about delaying sex, their children are more likely to postpone sexual intercourse.

Here are some steps that you can take to encourage your children to abstain from sex:

Be open-minded. Ask your child his or her opinion, and then be prepared to listen! Try to resist the urge to lecture. Instead, have ongoing two-way discussions with your

Here are a few suggestions for how you can get to know your child's friends and their families:

- Make sure that you are always around when your children's friends are visiting, and get to know them by talking with them.
- Invite your children's friends to family gatherings.
- Invite the parents of your children's friends to your children's parties.
- Drop your children off and/or pick them up when they visit their friends so that you can get to know their friends' parents. As your children get older, they may beg you not to drop them off because they feel embarrassed. If this is the case, consider allowing them to call you when they get to where they are going and when they are leaving.
- Before your child visits a new friend, call the friend's home to introduce yourself to the parents or guardians. During your conversation, you can talk about what you're comfortable or uncomfortable with when your child visits their home or goes out with their child.

For example, you can mention what time you would like your child to return home, you can ask whether a parent or adult will be around during the visit, and you can exchange phone numbers. Most parents will appreciate your call because they probably want to get to know the parents of their children's friends as well.

children about your values, expectations, and how to have healthy, respectful relationships. Your children may be facing the pressure to have sex to keep their partners or to make them feel mature or even accepted among their peers. Ask questions and create Teachable Moments in order to talk to them about these issues.

It is also important to understand and accept that many children may choose to have sex during their teen years. For this reason, it is essential to discuss safer sex methods like condoms to protect against sexually transmitted infections and birth control methods to protect against unplanned pregnancy.

Be aware of your child's whereabouts and activities. Now, that doesn't mean strap an electronic monitoring device on your kids (although secretly some of us would like to if we could get away with it). It means know where your children are and whom they are with when they go out. Make sure that there is responsible adult supervision if they are visiting a friend. It's a good idea to have their friends' home and cell phone numbers.

Monitor them when they are on the Internet and ask them to tell you about who they communicate with and what sites they visit. Keep in mind that even if you block sites at home, kids can access the Internet at a friend's house or at the library. It's important to let your child know your expectations concerning Internet use.

Become familiar with your child's friends and their families, particularly if there is a "love interest." Since children can have a strong influence on each other, you want to make sure that your children's friends and their parents share your values or at least respect your values and expectations for your children.

Encourage your child to avoid dating someone much older. Try to set a limit of no more than two to three years difference. Dating an older teen or adult can seem very "cool" to both girls and boys. There is often glamour associated with attracting someone significantly older, and an older person will tend to have more money and material possessions such as a car or apartment.

However, research shows that when a pre-teen or teenager is dating someone at least two years older, the older person has more power in the relationship and it is much harder for the younger person to stand firm on a decision to abstain from sex or to practice safer sex.*

** "Safer sex" refers to using condoms and dental dams (a rectangular sheet of latex) to protect yourself and your partner from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections that can be contracted during sexual activity such as oral, anal, or vaginal sex. It can also refer to using birth control methods to avoid unplanned pregnancy.*



Help your child to develop self-confidence and goals. Studies have shown that children are more likely to abstain if they have high self-esteem and goals for the future. Acknowledge the ways in which your children are special and wonderful, help them to develop their talents and skills, emphasize the importance of education, encourage them to take healthy risks like trying out for a sports team or running for student government, and work with them on a plan to achieve their goals.

Be a role model. Children learn not only from the information we give them, but also from our example. Our children observe our actions on a regular basis; it's like having a surveillance camera on you at all times! So, be mindful that your actions reflect the values that you want your children to have.

10. How can I tell my teen to wait to have sex until he or she is older when I was sexually active as a teen?

Regardless of what we did when we were young, we have to help our children get the information they need to make their own decisions about sexual activity. Some parents feel comfortable sharing their experiences when they were teens to highlight a particular message and communicate a family value.

For example, one parent may say: "When I was your age, I waited until I was in a loving and trusting relationship to have sex and we used condoms and birth control every time. If you decide to have sex, I hope you will talk to your partner about how you will both protect yourselves from pregnancy and STIs." Another parent with a different value may say: "I regret having sex in high school. If I could do it again, I would wait until I was in college and felt more secure about myself. I would like you to wait until after you graduate from high school to have sex."

Some reasons why teens don't use birth control or practice safer sex...

“don't feel at risk”

they're misinformed

can't easily get protection

“get caught in the heat of moment”

“don't like condoms”

can't talk to partner

Other parents do not feel comfortable sharing a personal story, and that is okay as well. In fact, it is perfectly fine to tell children “That’s a personal question” if they ask you directly about your sexual experiences. Whether or not you feel comfortable telling your child when you became sexually active, sharing your hopes and expectations about sexual activity for him or her will still send an important message to your child. Always remember to encourage your children to come to you with concerns about the sexual decisions they face.

You can also help your children to brainstorm ways to talk with their romantic partners about delaying sex or about safer sexual activity. It is important that you provide your children with support to avoid unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. [Talking to our children about safer sexual activity does not encourage them to have sex.](#) It keeps them safe from STIs and protected against unplanned pregnancy whenever they choose to have sex.

11. I know my child is sexually active. How do I bring up “safer sex” and pregnancy prevention without putting my child on the defensive?

Regardless of whether your children are sexually active or not, it’s important to speak with them about safer sex. Be subtle: try bringing up the conversation without asking about their current behavior. You can do this by using a Teachable Moment to find out how much your child knows about using protection. Once you know how much information your child has, you can fill in the gaps.

Make sure he or she knows where to get safer sex supplies, birth control, and sexual and reproductive health services. Offer to go with your child to a sexual and reproductive health center. And remember that educating our children about protection goes beyond giving them information about safer sex and birth control. It also includes teaching them about their responsibility and how to feel comfortable and confident talking to their partners about using protection.

12. I talk to my child about using protection and being safe. Yet, I know that my child is not using protection. What can I do?

First, find out why your child is not using protection. There are many reasons why teens, or people in general for that matter, don’t use birth control or practice safer sex.

Some of the more common reasons: they don’t feel at risk, they are misinformed, they are not committed to practicing safer sex or using birth control, they cannot easily get methods of protection, and they are not able to talk to their partners about using protection. Also, some people will say that they get “caught in the heat of the moment” or that they “don’t



like condoms.” Depending on the reason why your child is not using protection, you may want to use one of these strategies:

- Share factual information with your child, such as the rates of unplanned pregnancy and STI and HIV infections among teens.
- Share the experiences of young people who have suffered consequences from having unprotected sex.
- Make sure your child is familiar with safer sex methods, birth control, and emergency contraception* and can get them easily. You may want to keep a supply of condoms in a place in your home where your child will not have to ask for them.
- Talk to your child about what gets in the way of discussing protection with his or her partner. Don’t hesitate to get help from a professional if you get stuck. For instance, Planned Parenthood of New York City provides counseling on safer sex and birth control options that includes suggestions about how to talk to one’s partner about using protection.

Finally, you may also need to call on the support of other family members and people who are important to your child. Sometimes receiving the same message from a different messenger can make a big difference!

** “Emergency contraception” is a type of hormonal birth control that is taken up to five days after unprotected sex, but before pregnancy occurs, to help prevent a pregnancy from occurring.*

A Few Last Words

Don't beat yourself up if you don't feel comfortable talking to your children about sexuality right away. It doesn't happen overnight—it's an ongoing process.

Always remember that talking to your children about sexuality is an opportunity to share your views and values with them, to stay involved with what's going on in their lives, and to help them to grow up healthy. Children want to know about sexuality, and they want to learn about it from you!

We have found the information and techniques that we have included in this guide to be helpful to our families, and we hope that you will also find them helpful in conversations with the children in your life.

But don't let this be the end of your search for information on how to talk to your children about sexuality. Take a look at Pages 18–20 for more resources. You can also turn to a trusted friend or family member who has been successful in talking with his or her children about sexuality. We can all learn from each other. Good luck!





Where To Go For Help

Telephone, Internet, and Print Resources

Telephone Lines:

Planned Parenthood of New York City's
Appointment Line
212-965-7000

Planned Parenthood National Appointment
Hotline
800-230-PLAN
(800-230-7526)

HIV/AIDS Hotline
800-TALK-HIV
(800-825-5448)

Hetrick Martin Institute
212-674-2400
(services for gay and lesbian youth)

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD)
Information Line
212-427-5120

National STI Resource Center Hotline
800-227-8922

Safe Horizon (Domestic Violence) Hotline
800-621-HOPE (4673)
or 212-577-7777

NY Child Abuse Hotline
800-342-3720

Websites:

www.ppnyc.org
Planned Parenthood of New York City

www.plannedparenthood.org
Planned Parenthood Federation of America

www.pflag.org
Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and
Gays

www.thenationalcampaign.org
The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and
Unplanned Pregnancy

www.advocatesforyouth.org
Advocates for Youth

www.siecus.org
Sexuality Information and Education Council
of the United States

www.familiesaretalking.org
Sexuality Information and Education Council
of the United States

www.tnpc.com
The National Parenting Center

www.talkingwithkids.org
Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation

www.neahin.org/canwetalk/index.html
National Education Association Health
Information Network

Print Resources:

Beyond the Big Talk: Every Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Teens from Middle School to High School and Beyond. Debra W. Haffner. New York, NY: Newmarket Press, 2001.

Body Drama: Real Girls, Real Bodies, Real Issues, Real Answers. Nancy Redd. New York, NY: Gotham, 2007.

Everything You Never Wanted Your Kids to Know about Sex (But Were Afraid They'd Ask): The Secrets to Surviving Your Child's Sexual Development from Birth to the Teens. Justin Richardson and Mark Schuster. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2004.

From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children. Debra W. Haffner. New York, NY: Newmarket Press, 2004.

It's Not the Stork! A Book about Boys, Babies, Bodies, Families, and Friends. Robie Harris. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2006.

It's Perfectly Normal: A Book about Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health. Robie Harris. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1996.

It's So Amazing! A Book about Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families. Robie Harris. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2002.

Our Daughters and Sons: Questions and Answers for Parents of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual People (booklet). Washington, DC: Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, 2006. Available at www.pflag.org.

Parent Power: What Parents Need to Know and Do to Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2001. Tel: 202-478-8500. Also available at www.thenationalcampaign.org.

Sexuality: Your Sons and Daughters with Intellectual Disabilities. Karin Melberg Schwier and David Hingsburger. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Company, 2000.

Talking Back: Ten Things Teens Want Parents to Know about Teen Pregnancy (pamphlet). Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 1999. Tel: 202-478-8500. Also available at www.thenationalcampaign.org.

Ten Tips for Parents to Help Their Children Avoid Teen Pregnancy (pamphlet). Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008. Tel: 202-478-8500. Also available at www.thenationalcampaign.org.

The Subject Is Sex. Pamela M. Wilson, Marcia Quackenbush, and William M. Kane. Santa Cruz, CA: ETR Associates, 2001. Tel: 800-321-4407.

Third Base Ain't What It Used to Be: What Your Kids Are Learning about Sex Today—and How to Teach Them to Be Sexually Healthy Adults. Logan Levkoff, M.S. New York, NY: New American Library, 2007.

What Every 21st-Century Parent Needs to Know: Facing Today's Challenges with Wisdom and Heart. Debra W. Haffner. New York, NY: Newmarket Press, 2008.

What's Happening to My Body? Book for Boys: A Growing-up Guide for Parents and Sons. Lynda Madaras. New York, NY: Newmarket Press, 2000.

What's Happening to My Body? Book for Girls: A Growing-up Guide for Parents and Daughters. Lynda Madaras. New York, NY: Newmarket Press, 2000.

With One Voice 2007: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off about Teen Pregnancy. B. Albert. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2007. Tel: 202-478-8500. Also available at www.thenationalcampaign.org.

Print Resources Available from Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Tel: 877-478-7732 Website: www.ppfastore.org

How to Talk with Your Child about Sexuality: A Parent's Guide (pamphlet)

The Facts of Life: A Guide for Teens and Their Families (pamphlet)

Human Sexuality: What Children Need to Know and When They Need to Know It (pamphlet)

For additional resources in Spanish, flip this guide over.

ABOUT PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY

At Planned Parenthood of New York City, we have more than 90 years of experience providing high-quality sexual and reproductive health services and education in a safe, supportive environment. We offer services to women, men, and teens, regardless of age, income, or immigration status. For confidential appointments at our health centers located in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx, call [212-965-7000](tel:212-965-7000) or [800-230-PLAN](tel:800-230-PLAN).

VISIT PPNYC ON THE NET!

Check out our website, www.ppnyc.org, to find out about sexual and reproductive health topics.

You can also follow us on our blog, <http://unratedunfiltered.com>, and on [Facebook](#), [MySpace](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).

ADULT ROLE MODELS (ARM) PROGRAM AT PPNYC

In the ARM program, PPNYC trains local parents to lead workshops for other parents and caring adults on how to talk with their children about sexuality. The ARM program operates in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Brooklyn. For more information about it, call [212-274-7362](tel:212-274-7362) or e-mail us at ppnycadultrolemodels@ppnyc.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT

Planned Parenthood of New York City
Margaret Sanger Square
26 Bleecker Street
New York, New York 10012-2413
Tel: 212-274-7200
Fax: 212-274-7300
www.ppnyc.org