



# Talking with Teens about Sex, Dating, and Relationships

## A Guide for Parents & Caregivers

May 2024

Do you find it challenging to discuss sensitive topics like sex, dating, and relationships with the teens in your life? Maybe you don't know how to start the conversation. Or perhaps you're afraid you'll say the wrong thing. You're not alone. Many parents and caregivers find it difficult or awkward to have these conversations, but research shows that teens want to hear what their parents/caregivers have to say and that they value their opinions when making important decisions.<sup>1</sup> Studies also show that good communication about these topics helps prevent teens from engaging in behaviors that could lead to pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs),<sup>2-8</sup> and other risky behaviors.<sup>9-10</sup>

This resource guide will encourage positive communication with teens in your life about these topics by providing information and tips on effective communication strategies as well as essential facts and data to facilitate your conversation.

The guide contains two sections and a separate game:

- **Tips for Talking:** Tips for having clear, effective conversations with teens about sex, dating, and relationships.
- **Resources:** Links to more information on communicating with teens about sex and related topics as well as medically accurate information about topics such as contraception and STIs. There are also resources designed for teens, which you can review and share with them as part of your conversations.
- **27 Quick Questions – A Communication Game for Teens and Parents/Caregivers:** A game to spark open dialogue about sex, dating, and relationships and empower teens to make informed and responsible choices about sex. Use the game as an opportunity to find out what teens in your life think about these topics and share your own values and advice.

Throughout this document, references to “parents and caregivers” includes biological or adoptive parents, guardians, other relatives such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents, and other supportive adults who care for a teen. Although much of the research cited in this document refers to “parents” or asks adolescents about their “parents,” the research may extend to other types of caregivers.



## TIPS FOR TALKING

Get ready to talk with a teen you care for. Find out how to prepare for and initiate conversations and learn how to listen and talk so they will want to keep the conversation going.

- **Get informed.** Before talking, use the [resources below](#) to access current information about abstinence and contraception, STIs, and other important topics. If you are well informed, you can help them learn the difference between myths and facts and where to turn for credible information. You can teach them to question what they see and hear in the media and elsewhere and identify their own values.
- **Choose the right moment.** Look for a time when you are both relaxed and have energy. Avoid having sensitive or challenging conversations when one or both of you may be stressed or upset.
- **Make it an ongoing conversation.** Rather than one big conversation, have regular, informal discussions and keep an eye out for natural teachable moments. Start by noticing something on TV, the news, or other media and ask the teen in your life a question about it. For example, if you see a TV or movie character engaging in a risky behavior, you could ask what they think could happen to that character. Each conversation you have will likely make the next one a little bit easier for you both.
- **Go beyond the physical aspects of puberty, sex, and reproduction.** Consider the emotional and social aspects too, like attraction and healthy relationship formation, respect, consent and boundary setting, and sexual and gender identity. It's important to cover the risks and responsibility involved with sexual behavior. But remember to also acknowledge that sexuality is a natural and pleasurable aspect of a healthy relationship.
  - **Be a good, nonjudgmental listener.** Encourage the teen in your life to talk without worrying that they will feel judged. Ask open questions to encourage meaningful dialogue and listen attentively. If you are concerned about an opinion or belief they hold, ask them how they came to their conclusion. By asking questions that make them think about the “why” behind their beliefs and choices, you can help them build decision-making skills.
  - **Encourage them to ask questions.** Teens may be afraid that if they ask you questions about sex, you might assume they are engaging in certain behaviors, so be sure they know you won't make those assumptions. Let them know you will do your best to answer their questions and offer to find another trusted adult they can talk with if they would find it helpful.



- **Share your values.** Teens want to know what you believe and why. Think about why you have certain values. Your values about sex, dating, and relationships could be influenced by your cultural background or religion, your own experiences during adolescence, or by what you've learned from reading what medical experts and others have to say. Calmly explain the reasons behind your opinions and the expectations you have for the teen in your life. Acknowledge that they may have opinions that differ from yours and show respect for their feelings and opinions.
- **Be comfortable setting rules and limits.** Clearly communicate any rules you have about dating and share your reasons for your rules. Remind them that one of your most important jobs as a parent/caregiver is to provide guidance and limits that help them make safe, responsible decisions.



- **Use accurate terminology.** Use standard terms such as “penis” and “vagina” when it comes to talking about anatomy or sexual behaviors.
- **Don't force them to talk with you if they are not ready.** Let them know you are always interested in hearing what they have to say and that they can always come to you for advice and support. If they don't yet feel comfortable talking with you, or if there are certain topics you are not comfortable discussing because of past trauma or other reasons, encourage them to talk with another trusted adult like a co-parent, grandparent or other family member, or a school nurse or counselor. When you take them to their health care provider for preventive care, encourage them to ask questions about sex, pregnancy, STIs, and sexual health services like birth control and STI testing. Allow them to have one-on-one time with the provider so they can talk confidentially.

## RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Use these resources to learn more tips for communicating with teens about sex and to stay up-to-date on important topics like contraception and STI prevention.

- Family and Youth Services Bureau: [Talking with Teens about Relationships and Sex](#)
- Office of Population Affairs: [Talking with Teens about Relationships](#)
- American Academy of Pediatrics, [healthychildren.org](http://healthychildren.org):
  - [Adolescent Sexuality: Talk the Talk Before They Walk the Walk](#) [↗](#)
  - [Contraception Explained: Birth Control Options for Teens and Adolescents](#) [↗](#)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
  - [Talking with Your Teens about Sex: Going Beyond “the Talk”](#)
  - [Parent and Guardian Resources: Help Your Teen Make Healthy Choices About Sex](#)
  - [Birth Control: Information for Parents of Adolescents](#)
  - [Sexually Transmitted Diseases \(STDs\)](#)
- American Sexual Health Association: [Be an Askable Parent](#) [↗](#)
- Center for Parent and Teen Communication
  - [Teens’ Developing Sexuality](#) [↗](#)
  - [10 Strategies to Talk with Teens About Sex](#) [↗](#)
- Mayo Clinic: [Sex Education: Talking to Your Teen About Sex](#) [↗](#)
- NPR, Life Kit: [What Your Teen Wishes You Knew About Sex Education](#) [↗](#)
- Healthy Native Youth: [Talking is Power: Tools for Parents](#) [↗](#)

## RESOURCES FOR TEENS

Below are a variety of resources written for teens about sex and sexuality. Explore these resources and decide which ones to share with teens in your life.

- Family and Youth Services Bureau:
  - [Sexually Transmitted Infections—Get the Facts](#) (infographic for teens about STIs)
  - [Teen Sexting: Think Twice Before You Hit “Send”](#) (infographic for teens)
- *We Think Twice*™ [Dating and Relationships](#) (videos, listicles, quizzes, and games for teens about dating, relationships, and friendships)
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: [love is respect](#) [↗](#) (offers 24/7 information, support, and advocacy to young people between the ages of 13 and 26 who have questions or concerns about their romantic relationships)

- Power to Decide: [Teen Talk](#) (information for teens about sex, love, and relationships to help them make informed decisions)
- Advocates for Youth: [Amaze.org](#) (sex education videos for youth about puberty, reproduction, relationships, sex, and sexuality)
- Nemours TeensHealth: [Sexual Health](#) (facts for teens about puberty, birth control, and STIs)
- [The Trevor Project](#) (provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning [LGBTQ] young people ages 13–24; [includes 24/7 free, confidential crisis counseling via phone, text, and chat](#))
- American Academy of Pediatrics, [healthychildren.org](#): [For Teens: How to Make Healthy Decisions about Sex](#)

## REFERENCES

1. Ackard, D. M., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Story, M., & Perry, C. (2006). Parent–child connectedness and behavioral and emotional health among adolescents. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 30(1), 59–66. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2005.09.013>
2. Commendador, K. A. (2010). Parental influences on adolescent decision making and contraceptive use. *Pediatric Nursing*, 36(3), 147–156, 170. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20687307/>
3. Guilamo-Ramos, V., Bouris, A., Lee, J., McCarthy, K., Michael, S. L., Pitt-Barnes, S., & Dittus, P. (2012). Paternal influences on adolescent sexual risk behaviors: A structured literature review. *Pediatrics*, 130(5), e1313–e1325. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-2066>
4. Hutchinson, M. K., Jemmott, J. B., Jemmott, L. S., Braverman, P., & Fong, G. (2003). The role of mother–daughter sexual risk communication in reducing sexual risk behaviors among urban adolescent females: A prospective study. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 33(2), 98–107. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X\(03\)00183-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X(03)00183-6)
5. L’Engle, K. L., Jackson, C., & Brown, J. D. (2006). Early adolescents’ cognitive susceptibility to initiating sexual intercourse. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 38(2), 97–105. <https://doi.org/10.1363/3809706>
6. Markham, C. M., Lormand, D., Gloppen, K. M., Peskin, M. F., Flores, B., Low, B., & House, L. D. (2010). Connectedness as a predictor of sexual and reproductive health outcomes for youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 46(3), S23–S41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.11.214>
7. Miller, K. S., Levin, M. L., Whitaker, D. J., & Xu, X. (1998). Patterns of condom use among adolescents: The impact of mother-adolescent communication. *American Journal of Public Health*, 88(10), 1542–1544. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.88.10.1542>
8. Widman, L., Choukas-Bradley, S., Noar, S. M., Nesi, J., & Garrett, K. (2016). Parent-adolescent sexual communication and adolescent safer sex behavior: A meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 170(1), 52–61. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2015.2731>
9. Donaldson, C. D., Handren, L. M., & Crano, W. D. (2016). The enduring impact of parents’ monitoring, warmth, expectancies, and alcohol use on their children’s future binge drinking and arrests: A longitudinal analysis. *Prevention Science*, 17(5), 606–614. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-016-0656-1>
10. Mahabee-Gittens, E. M., Xiao, Y., Gordon, J. S., & Khoury, J. C. (2013). The dynamic role of parental influences in preventing adolescent smoking initiation. *Addictive Behaviors*, 38(4), 1905–1911. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2013.01.002>

This guide was created by the *We Think Twice*<sup>™</sup> campaign with support from the Family and Youth Services Bureau. It is one of several valuable resources designed for youth-serving professionals as well as parents/caregivers. It is intended to encourage positive youth development by strengthening prevention education and other youth development programs.



The WE THINK TWICE and WTT wordmarks and the WE THINK TWICE logo are trademarks of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Unauthorized use of these marks is strictly prohibited.

This resource was developed by RTI International under contract GS-00F-354-CA/75ACF122F80038 with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau.