

Talking sex with young people

Young people learn about sex, sexuality and relationships from lots of different sources. They need balanced and accurate information that helps them make informed choices and which keeps them and others safe.

Parents convey very important messages to young people through their attitudes and behaviour, whether they talk about sex or not. When you talk with young people about these things it can strengthen your relationship and help them work out their values. Importantly, young people learn they can talk with you about sensitive matters.

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Why talk about sex?

Talking with your son or daughter about sex, sexuality and relationships is important because:

- you have a big influence on the beliefs and attitudes they take on and how they relate to others
- these are key things young people are working out at this stage in their development
- it is a chance to give accurate, balanced information and discuss your family values
- talking can strengthen your relationship and build trust — they will be more likely to come to you if they have a problem
- young people are exposed to lots of images and information in the media which can give distorted ideas about sex and relationships. You can help them question what they see and hear
- some young people are having sex whether we talk with them about it or not. Studies show that about a quarter

of Year 10 students are sexually active, and by the end of high school about 50 per cent of young people have had sex. Many young people don't practice safe sex which puts them at risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection, or becoming pregnant. While sexual activity is often within a relationship, some young people have had a number of sexual partners or have engaged in sex with someone they just met

- young people with physical or intellectual disabilities need information about privacy, safety and sexual matters too. They can be more easily exploited so it's important they know how to keep safe. Seek help from a professional if you need it.

Studies show that young people who receive good sexuality education delay having sex, have less unplanned pregnancies and less sexually transmitted infections.



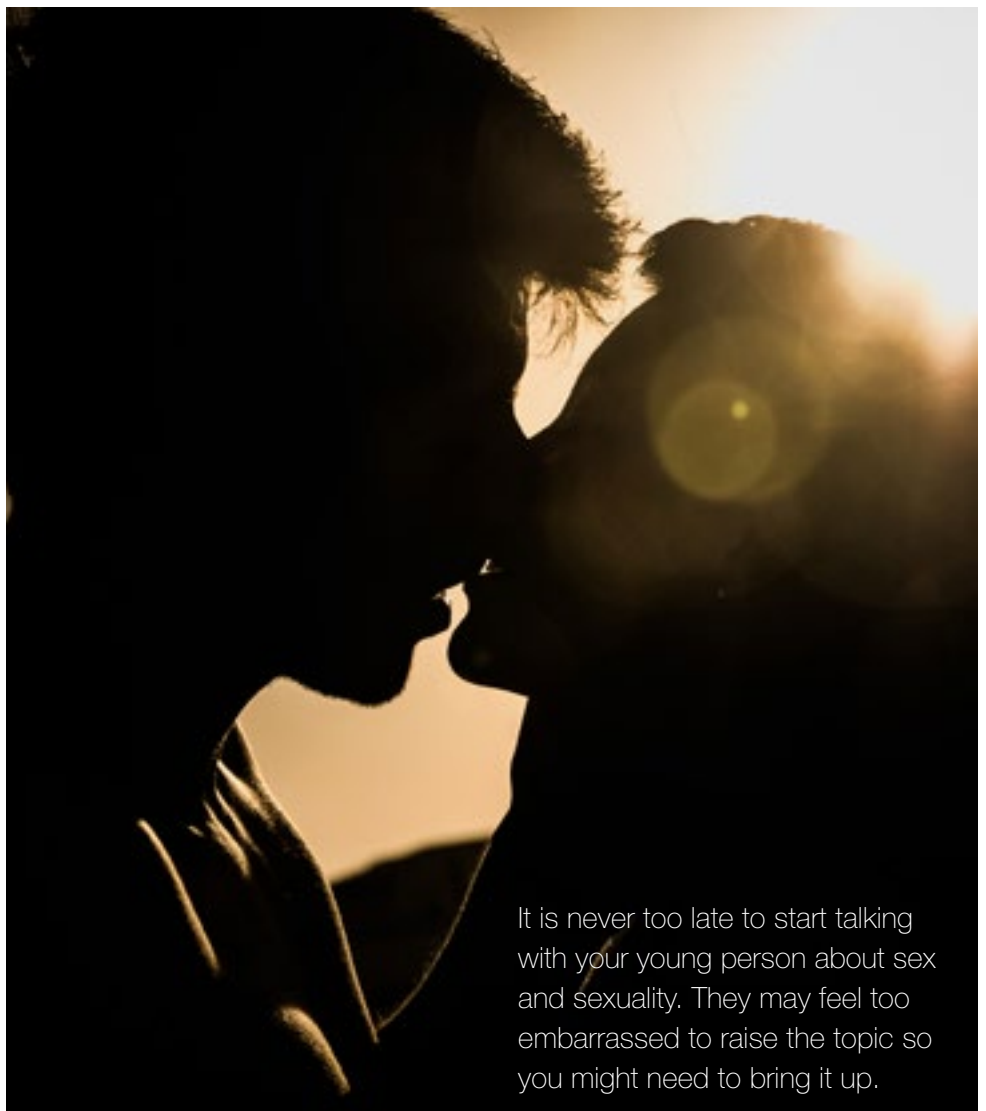
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Tips for talking with young people

- Understand your own values, attitudes and feelings about sex. This can make it easier to talk with your young person.
- Think about how the values you have held about sexuality and relationships have affected you and others. What values and messages do you want to pass on?
- Be aware of what you say and how you act when it comes to sex and relationships. Young people easily pick up on double standards.
- If you have particular cultural or religious beliefs, think about the best ways your son or daughter can get information that keeps them safe.
- If you have a partner, talk about how you'll approach things. Parents may have different views from each other.
- If you are in a same-sex relationship or are a single parent, think about someone of the other sex that your son or daughter could talk to for another view.
- Know what you think about topics such as masturbation, homosexuality, contraception, abortion and sex outside a relationship.
- Learn about the sexual issues young people face today. You could watch TV programs, read books and magazines or search the internet. Talk with other parents for tips. Check with your school or local health centre for any sessions on youth sexual health.
- Talk about sex and feelings in an inclusive way so that your young person knows they can come to you however they are feeling. Young people who are attracted to their own sex, or both sexes often feel very different, confused and alone as they start to think about sex and relationships.



It is never too late to start talking with your young person about sex and sexuality. They may feel too embarrassed to raise the topic so you might need to bring it up.

Be approachable and 'unshockable'

- Try talking about these things in a calm and natural way and let your young person know this is a topic you are happy to talk about. This makes it easier for everyone. You could talk when doing everyday things like travelling in the car or doing the dishes.
- You both may have very strong and different views. Be prepared to listen and have two-way conversations rather than do all the talking. This is a good opportunity to strengthen your relationship and learn more about how they see things.

Give accurate and timely information

- There's no right or wrong time to talk about sexuality. Be guided by your young person's interest and answer their questions honestly.

- If you don't have the answer, say you'll try to find out and get back to them, or help them find out.
- Encourage them to get advice from a health professional when they need it. Offer to go with them but respect their decision to go by themselves, to have you wait in the waiting room, or to take a friend.

Foster self-respect

Feeling good about yourself is very important in creating healthy relationships. Encourage your son or daughter to:

- feel good about their body and know how it works
- respect themselves and feel comfortable with their own values
- feel confident to say 'No', or 'Stop' and to understand they should not put up with abuse or be pressured to have sex.

Focus on healthy relationships

Sex education in the past often focused on the physical aspects of sex. However, sex is also about sexuality, gender, relationships, feelings and being a whole person. It is important for young people of both sexes to understand that:

- feelings, caring, mutual respect and safety are all part of a healthy relationship

- being male or female can sometimes make a difference to what sex means
- they don't have to stay in an abusive or unhealthy relationship. Give them information about the signs of unhealthy relationships, e.g. controlling behaviour, threats or violence, put downs, jealousy, or feeling worthless. Help them work out what to do
- some young people feel attracted to the same sex, or both sexes. Some may not identify with their gender, e.g. feel more like a girl even though they were born a boy. This can make it confusing for them to know who they are attracted to. It is important

that parents are aware of their own feelings about same-sex attraction and gender identity. If you think this may be hard for you to discuss, try to find someone you both trust they can talk to.

When talking with your young person about sexuality and relationships, don't assume they are having sex, even if they are in a relationship.

It is important to talk about relationships and feelings as well as the physical aspects of sex. Stress the importance of mutual respect, consent and safety.

Teach sexual responsibility

- Encourage young people to be sensitive, responsible and safe about sex.
- Sexual responsibility and respect for the other person is equally important for males and females. Be careful not to encourage different expectations.
- Talk with young people about what they want from a relationship, even before they start dating. When young people think about this before the heat of the moment it can lead to better decisions.
- Make sure they understand about consent to have sex. Consent means freely agreeing to sexual activity, and taking responsibility for ensuring the person you want to be sexual with is comfortable and agrees to go further. If someone is asleep or so intoxicated they don't know what's going on, then they are not consenting. Pressuring or forcing someone to have sex is a crime.
- In the ACT the age of consent for sexual intercourse is 16 years for both males and females.

Help them understand risks

- Make sure your son or daughter knows how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections, how to avoid pregnancy, about emergency contraception and what choices they have if there is a pregnancy. Ensure they know where to get condoms and how to use them.
- Talk about the risks of using alcohol and other drugs. Being under the influence of alcohol or drugs can increase the risk of acting before thinking, having unsafe sex or of others taking advantage of you.
- Let them know about regular health checks — testicular cancer checks for men, a pap smear (cervix screening test) for women who have ever been sexually active, and Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) immunisation for both women and men.

Work tricky things out together

- Talk about what's OK in your home. For example, if your young person's girlfriend or boyfriend stays overnight is it OK for them to sleep together? Some parents feel fine about this, others don't. What do the parents of the other young person think?
- If you feel OK about having them sleep over, talk with your family ahead of time about what would work for everyone. Do this when family members are open to discussing it and there's time to talk it through. Remember what the law says about the age of consent.

Two-way discussions about sex, sexuality and relationships help young people think about their values. Open communication based on accurate information works better than lectures.

Don't let pornography be a source of sexuality and relationships education for your young person. They may think this is what to expect.

Talking sex with young people

Talk about pornography

- Pornography has become a very big issue for young people. It is easy to find online, either by searching for it or coming across it by accident. It is important to talk about pornography with both boys and girls because it can influence their attitudes to sex, shape their sexual tastes and affect their ability to form respectful relationships.
- Think about how to raise this topic. You might use a TV program, a news report or a website to open up the conversation. You could ask questions that make it seem less personal but which help you understand what they already know and think about pornography, e.g. 'Do any kids at school talk about pornography?', or 'Do you have any questions about what you've heard?' Let them know it is OK to be curious about sex and sexuality but it is important to understand that pornography doesn't encourage respect.
- Even though it might feel uncomfortable, talking about pornography is just part of talking about sexuality and respectful relationships. Rather than talk about it as 'good' or 'bad', use it as an opportunity to talk about the messages it sends and how these fit with their values. For example, pornography focuses on extreme sexual behaviour rather than on feelings and relationships. It can make people think that:
 - respectful relationships and mutual consent aren't important
 - practicing safe sex isn't necessary
 - rough sex and domination are normal and it is OK to be aggressive and even violent.

Getting help

Many young people are easily embarrassed. They might say they don't want to talk about sex or know it all already. Let them know you think it is an important topic that you are happy to talk about at any time. Make sure they know where else to get information and support. The websites and services below are good places to start.

If you don't feel comfortable, or your son or daughter doesn't feel comfortable talking with you about this topic, make sure they know where to find accurate and balanced information. It is also important they have a trusted adult they can talk to.

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, a partnership between the Department of Education and Child Development and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

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