

Talking sex with young people

YOUNG PEOPLE

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

Young people learn from parents about relationships, sexuality and having sex. Parents and carers convey very important messages through their own attitudes and behaviours whether they talk about it or not.

Some parents think telling their son or daughter about sex will make them want to try things out. Some feel too embarrassed to talk about it at all. Some cultures and religions have a particular view or way of talking about the topic. Other parents avoid it in the hope their young person will learn about it at school or from the media. If you don't talk to them, the information they get from others may not be accurate and could place them at risk.

Giving young people balanced and accurate information about sex is very important. This helps them understand their values so they can make informed choices rather than be pressured by others. It helps strengthen your relationship when they know they can come to you about anything.

Why talk about it?

- At this stage in their development, sex, sexuality and relationships are key things young people need to work out.
- You have a big influence on the values they take on and how they relate to others.
- Children and young people have become more sexually aware because they're exposed to lots of information from an early age. The media can give distorted ideas about sex and relationships. You can't protect them from this but you can help by giving accurate information.
- Some young people are having sex whether we tell them about it or not. Studies show that nearly one-third of Australian young people have had sex by Year 10, and two thirds by Year 12. Be careful though not to assume they're having sex, even if they're in a relationship.
- Studies show that countries where it's okay to talk openly about sex have lower rates of sexual infections, unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, and sexual violence.

Young people with physical or intellectual disabilities need information as well. They can be more easily exploited so it's important to provide information in ways they understand.

What parents can do

Be prepared

- Talk about sex with children in age-appropriate ways. This will make it easier to bring up as they get older. Learn ways to be relaxed doing this as it makes it easier for everyone.
- Understand your own feelings about sex. Your emotions can affect how you talk about things.
- If you have particular cultural or religious beliefs, think about the best ways your son or daughter can get information to keep safe.
- If you have a partner, talk together about how you'll approach things. Parents may have different views from each other. If you're in a same sex relationship, think about a friend your son or daughter can talk to for another perspective.
- Think about how views and values have affected you in the past, and the values and messages you want to pass on.
- Know what you think about topics such as masturbation, homosexuality, rape, contraception, abortion and sex outside a relationship. How will you handle different views to yours?
- Learn about the sexual issues young people face today by watching 'soaps' on television, reading books, magazines or searching the internet. Talk with other parents to get helpful tips about how to discuss things.



What parents can do *continued*

- Don't assume he's heterosexual (attracted to the other sex). Talk about sex and feelings in an inclusive way so he knows he can come to you about his sexuality.
- Young people who are same sex attracted can be more vulnerable and at risk. They often feel very different and alone as they start to think about sex and relationships.
- Young people get embarrassed very easily. He might say he doesn't want to talk about it now so let him know you're available any time to talk. Let him know where else he can get information and support.

Be approachable and 'unshockable'

- You can state your views but be prepared to talk and listen rather than giving a lecture.
- Boys often get ideas about sex from pornography. Try not to react negatively about things that make you uncomfortable, for example, if you find he's using pornography. Use the opportunity to have a discussion about it. He needs you to provide a balanced view to the information he's getting.
- You both may have very strong and different views. Try to be tolerant and reasonable. Having a good relationship with him is more important in the long run.

Foster self-respect

Feeling good about yourself is very important in creating healthy relationships and enjoying sex.

Encourage her to:

- feel good about her body and know how it works
- respect herself and feel comfortable with her own values
- know what she likes and what she doesn't. studies show when girls know what they like they're less likely to be pressured into doing things they don't want to
- know that sex isn't just for making babies—it feels good, which is why people do it. She doesn't need to feel afraid, ashamed or guilty about sexual feelings and sexual pleasure
- be confident to say 'no' and to understand she doesn't have to put up with abusive behaviour or feel pressured to have sex.

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Highlight healthy relationships

Over the years, a lot of sex education has focussed on the physical aspects of having sex. However, sex is also about sexuality, relationships and being a whole person.

It's 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
- it's okay to have feelings for people of the same sex. She needs to know she can talk about this with you. If you feel you don't know what to tell her, maybe she can talk with a gay or lesbian friend of yours she's comfortable with and who you trust.

Teach sexual responsibility

- Encourage him to be sensitive, responsible and safe about sex.
- Sexual responsibility is equally important for males and females. Be careful not to encourage different expectations and double standards.
- Have conversations with him about what he wants from a relationship before he starts dating. Thinking about these things before the heat of the moment can lead to better decisions.
- We teach children and young people how to protect themselves with many things and trust them to do this. We need to trust their ability to care for themselves and make good decisions when it comes to sex.
- Make sure he understands about consent to have sex. Pressuring or forcing someone to have sex is a crime – 'no' means 'no'.
- Know what the law says about how old you have to be to consent to sex. In the Australian Capital Territory the age of consent for sexual intercourse is 16 years for both males and females. This means it's against the law to have sex with someone under 16 years, even if both parties are under 16 and consent to sex.
- Talk about the risks of using alcohol and other drugs. Being under the influence of alcohol or drugs can increase the risk of unsafe sex and others taking advantage of you.
- Teach him how to protect himself from sexually transmitted infections, how to avoid pregnancy, about emergency contraception and what choices they have if she gets pregnant.
- Let them know about having regular health checks (testicular cancer checks for men, pap smears for women, and Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) immunisation for both women and men).

What parents can do *continued*

Give accurate and timely information

- There's no right or wrong time to talk about sex, but you need to consider her level of development and maturity.
- Adults often try to be helpful but skirt around what they're really trying to say. Don't say 'Make sure you protect yourself' when what she really needs to know is where to get condoms and how to use them.
- Answer her questions honestly. If you don't have the answer, say so. Tell her you'll find out and get back to her, or help her to find out.
- Encourage her to get advice from a health professional when she needs it. Offer to go with her but respect her decision to go by herself, to have you wait in the waiting room, or to take a friend.

Work together on tricky things

- Talk about what's okay in your home. For example, if your son's girlfriend or boyfriend stays overnight is it okay for them to sleep together? Some parents feel okay about this, other parents don't.
- If you feel okay about having them sleep over, have discussions ahead of time with your family about what would work for everyone. Do this at a time when family members are open to talking about it and there's time to talk it through. Remember what the law says about the age of consent.

Young people can get embarrassed about lots of things. They may be embarrassed to ask about sex so make it easy for them to talk to you.

Reminders

- Start talking about sex early and learn ways to be comfortable and relaxed about it.
- Be aware of your attitudes and feelings but don't always expect your son or daughter to share them.
- Talking about sex, sexuality and relationships helps them understand there may be differences between your family values and the values of others.
- Values about sex are passed on easily—what you do and how you say things are just as important as what you say. Young people are very tuned in to double standards.
- Talk about the importance of relationships and feelings rather than just about the physical aspects of sex.
- Stress the importance of consent, mutual respect and safety.
- Young people can get embarrassed about lots of things. They may be embarrassed to ask about sex so make it easy for them to talk to you.
- If they don't want to talk with you, make sure they have balanced and accurate information, or someone you trust they can talk with.
- Young people need understanding and support rather than lectures.

Contacts

Kids Help Line	24-hour	1800 55 1800
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.kidshelp.com.au	Kids helpline
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides, including Abuse of parents, Discipline (teens)

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Published by ParentLink
Department of Housing, Disability & Community Services | ACT
GPO Box 158
Canberra ACT 2601

T 13 34 27
F 6205 0968
E parentlink@act.gov.au