

## Guidelines for Parents for Talking with Children or Teens about Sexuality

### **Be Honest**

When talking about sexuality, it is best to be honest—not just about the facts of life but about your feelings, attitudes, ignorance, and ambivalence. Children and teens can understand that learning about sexuality is a lifelong process. Adults are still learning too.

### **Use Teachable Moments**

There are many opportunities each day to talk about sexuality. Sexual issues are raised by films, pop music, graffiti, magazines, T.V., etc. When a sexual issue is opened for us by one of these media, we can use the chance to ask an open-ended question, begin a discussion, or make a statement of information or value.

### **Make A Distinction Between Facts And Opinions**

It is important for us to clearly label what we are saying as either fact, opinion or belief. It is important to state our own belief or value because teens and children need to know that values are important to us; but we also need to acknowledge that other people may have different values. There is very little consensus in this culture about many controversial issues in sexuality—and the more controversial the issue, the more uncomfortable we are and the more likely we are to state our opinions as though they were fact. Talk about the range of values, and basing safe and healthy decisions on these values.

### **Don't Hesitate To Set Limits**

It is important to know what your own bottom line is: identify for yourself what you can accept; what you have difficulty accepting but can tolerate or work on; and what you absolutely cannot accept. Communicate these limits to the professionals with whom you work and with the rest of your family—foster care children as well as natural children. When working with teens, see if you can negotiate limits, encouraging communication, feedback, and flexibility. But once a limit is set, stick to it until it is re-negotiated.

### **Learn All You Can About Sexuality**

We as adults are still learning and growing regarding sexuality. New information is being discovered all the time. We need to take the time to read, think, talk, and learn so we can be more effective with our children and teens, and also for our growth and learning.

### **Take Some Time For You**

Many of us haven't had the time to really think about our own sexual values and attitudes so when we try to communicate them, it's confusing. Take the time to think.





## HIV/AIDS: Parent Guide to Teachable Moments

Parents and teenagers often find it difficult to communicate and discuss topics such as sex and drugs because it makes them uncomfortable. It is important to bridge this communication gap however, and discuss this very important topic. It is a matter of life and death for your teenager! Parents want to protect their children but don't always know how to go about opening the lines of communication for varying reasons:

- Some mistakenly believe discussing sexual and drug issues will encourage teens to engage in these activities.
- Parents feel they might not have enough accurate information.
- Some parents deny that their child participates in risky behavior.
- Many parents have little experience talking about sex.
- Some parents have trouble relating to their teens as sexual beings.
- Parental denial or discomfort exists regarding homosexuality, premarital sex, and/or their own personal history of sexual behavior.

Parents need to know that their discomfort is normal and that there are ways to overcome their discomfort and become active communicators and listeners with their teenagers. Teenagers want to go to their parents for information about sensitive topics such as sex, drugs and AIDS but are often embarrassed or uncomfortable. Some teenagers don't go to their parents because they sense their parents' discomfort with these topics. It is important that parents be educated and comfortable in discussing sex, drugs and AIDS. To do this, parents must know some basic facts about AIDS and safer sex:

- HIV is a preventable infection.
- There is no cure for AIDS.
- The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) which causes AIDS, is transmitted
- during sex or while sharing injection drug equipment.
- HIV is not spread by casual contact (kissing, hugging, etc.).
- Abstinence from both sex and drugs is the best way to prevent infection with HIV, the virus which causes AIDS.
- The use of a latex condom is termed "safer" sex, meaning safer than no protection at all. When used consistently and correctly condoms are 85-98% effective in preventing pregnancy and offer good protection against HIV and other STIs. Only abstinence (or sex with a lifelong, mutually monogamous uninfected partner) is 100% "safe sex."
- The more sexual partners a person has, the greater the chance of coming in contact with someone who is infected.
- Drugs and alcohol impair judgment when making sexual decisions. They should not be used before or during sexual activity.



- A pre-existing STI (sexually transmitted infection) increases the person's chances of an HIV infection.

Here are some simple communication techniques that parents can practice when discussing this sensitive subject with their teenager:

- Learn the basic information about HIV/AIDS so you can share the facts.
- Think about and plan what you want to say before you start talking.
- The best time to talk with your teen is when the subject of HIV/AIDS comes up naturally in conversation.
- If the subject doesn't come up, don't wait. You can start the conversation.
- Discuss the facts at a level that your teen can understand.
- Share your feelings. It is okay to admit feeling awkward or embarrassed about this topic.
- Find out what your teen already knows and thinks about HIV/AIDS.
- Listen to your teen. Be calm and give your teen time to share their feelings.
- Reassure your teen. Let your teen know you are a resource and that you will be there for him or her.

Once a parent is educated and has practiced communication skills, they are ready to talk with their teenager about HIV/AIDS. Even though their teenager does not ask direct questions regarding this topic it does not mean they don't want to ask these questions. Take advantage of daily situations and discuss radio, television or newspaper articles with your child. When you hear HIV/AIDS mentioned or see something written, comment on it and open a discussion as casually as possible. Ask your child how they feel about the topic. If a question arises that you can't answer, admit that you don't know the answer and research it to discuss later.

Combine facts, feelings and values when talking with your teen. For example, when discussing condoms also discuss your feelings about waiting to have sex until they are married or in a committed relationship. This way, condom use and sexual abstinence can be discussed.



## Parent Communication Tips

I have a concern I'd like to share with you . . .

After seeing that (T.V. show, magazine article, movie), I've been thinking about . . .

What do you think about . . . ?

How do you feel about . . . ?

I'm not sure I understand you. Will you try to say it another way?

Let me check this out with you . . . Are you saying that . . . ?

What we're talking about makes me feel pretty uncomfortable (embarrassed, angry, concerned), but I'd like to continue anyway.

I'd be really interested in hearing what you think about . . . (or feel about . . .)

Tell me some more about how you feel about . . .

Can you say anything more about . . . ?

You know, I haven't given that much thought lately. Give me a few minutes to think about it.

There's something important to me that I'd like to share with you.

Go on . . .

I don't know the answer to that one. But let's (go to the library, think about it, look it up, talk with someone who might know, find out about it) and talk again tomorrow on our way to the game (set a specific time to get back to it).

It would be really helpful to me if you'd share with me how you feel about . . .

I've been thinking about our conversation last night (last week, last month) about . . . and there's some more I'd like to say.

I have a different feeling about that.

Thank you . . . for sharing with me, for talking with me, for listening . . . , for being patient, for giving me time.





## Hints That Can Help You Talk with Your Child About Sex

### **Learn to listen**

All children need to feel that their ideas or concerns about sex are worth listening to.

### **Look for natural opportunities to talk**

You don't have to wait until your child comes to you with suggestions or comments about sex. He or she may be too embarrassed to ask you first. Take advantage of natural openings to talk about sex, something you see in the newspaper, on television, animal behavior, pregnant relatives or friends.

### **Listen carefully for hidden feelings**

Many times children have trouble saying exactly what they mean, especially when it comes to sex. Remember that your child may be afraid to talk about certain things. Let your child know you will not get mad or upset about anything he or she brings up.

### **Try to avoid judging your child**

Making harsh judgements or criticizing children's attitudes about sex will most often cut off communication. Children will open up more quickly with parents who are willing to listen in an understanding manner.

### **Let your child express his or her feelings freely**

Many young people have values or opinions about sex that are different from their parents. Remember, these may not be firmly held ideas or values, but only part of the sorting-out process young people go through. First, listen to what your child has to say. If you agree with what your child says, say so. If you disagree, then clearly state your own viewpoint, and why you feel that way. However, let the child know that you will discuss it again, that he or she can freely express that same opinion again.

### **Don't cut off communication**

Parents sometimes lose the chance to help young people think and talk about sex, because they begin to nag, preach or moralize. This type of communication is usually destructive. The young person needs to know that talking about sex is two-way communication.

### **Questions**

Avoid over- or under-answering questions. Answer questions directly. Don't assume that a simple question about sex needs an answer far beyond what was asked! If you don't know the answer to a question, offer to find out. On the other hand, if the question deals mostly with values and opinions, you may want to take some extra time to tell your child how you formed your opinions, or where your values about the subject came from. Whatever you do, don't jump to conclusions about what your child is doing based on questions he or she may ask.



**Do you need help?**

If you need support or assistance in talking to or educating your children about sex, reach out to others in your community. Some parents have started self-help groups. There are many resources and concerned professionals available in most communities who can be of assistance, including credentialed health teachers, public health professionals, local AIDS service organizations, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) and the National AIDS Hotline (1-800-CDC-INFO).

*(Adapted from Changes and Choices: Your Children and Sex produced by the Emory Grady Teen Services Program.)*





## Answers to Your Sexting Questions

Wednesday “Good Morning America” and Internet safety expert Parry Aftab of WiredSafety.com brought parents and kids together to discuss a new, possibly dangerous phenomenon called “sexting” – teens sharing with friends sexually explicit images or messages via cell phones.

### **What were those three things parents can do to see if their kids are at risk?**

First, parents should Google their child’s first and last names in quotes, Aftab said. Second, do the same with their child’s cell phone number. See what results come back for each of these searches.

Third, parents can download Google Desktop, which can search your computer for pictures and videos the same way regular Google searches the Internet. That way you can see if your computer is already home to some potentially dangerous images or videos. To find Google Desktop, do a search for “Google Desktop” on Google.com.

### **If texting is the problem, why not get your child a phone that can’t do that?**

According to Aftab, it’s not texting that’s the problem, and it can actually be a great way to stay in touch with your child. It’s the pictures that can pose a problem.

If they choose, parents can buy a phone without a camera – which the child might hate – but will largely solve the problem. Or, you can call the phone company and request a plan that restricts Internet access and picture texting. Not only will you be safer, it could save you money.

### **Why doesn’t simply taking away their phones work?**

Many parents might not know, but many gaming devices that use the Internet, including the Xbox, Nintendo DS and Sony PSP have memory cards that allow kids to keep pictures on them. Webcams, digital video, iPhones, iTouch and iPods can all be used. With all these other options, taking away the phone is probably not the complete answer, Aftab said.

### **What if you find out your child has been involved in sexting?**

It’s important to remember there’s a difference between spying and parenting, Aftab said. Make sure your message comes across as a concern for their safety, not as nosiness about who they are texting.

But don’t let them intimidate you from your job as a parent. The first time you check up on them, give them an opportunity to clean up things first. Then it’s not a “gotcha” moment. It’s an opportunity for discussion.



## Why do kids do this in the first place?

For a lot of good kids out there, the problem is that they're forced into a situation, Aftab said. They don't know how to say no.

We need to start giving them some answers like "if you love me, you wouldn't ask me to do this. You wouldn't put me in a humiliating situation." We need to give girls and boys the language to say, "I love you, but I won't do this."

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## The Truth About Teens Sexting

**Cole Kazdin and Imaeyen Ibanga**

Sex easily and quickly integrated itself into the digital age; and now the teen trend of "sexting" – where a user sends sexually explicit images or messages via text on a cell phone – has parents struggling for a way to address the situation.

"We're seeing 14, 15 and 16-year-olds and up are very commonly sharing naked pictures or sexual pictures of themselves," said Internet safety expert Parry Aftab, of Wired Safety. "We're talking about kids who are too young to wear bras who are posing in them, and then topless and then actually engaged in sex or even in masturbation. So we are seeing a lot of kids who are sexually active."

There's nothing coy about this 21<sup>st</sup> century amorous pursuit. Children as young as 12, who aren't sexually active, are sending explicit, provocative and even pornographic images to their peers.

"It's all about immediacy for them, and it's so much about, they're building their hormones and sexuality," said educator Dawn Russell. "It's so much about getting the opposite sex."

Aftab is concerned at how widespread the problem of sexting has become.

"We found that 44 percent of the high school boys that we have polled have seen at least one naked picture of a female classmate, and the boys are sharing their pictures too," Aftab said.

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