

10 Tips for Parents to Help Their Children Avoid Teen Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy has reviewed recent research about parental influence on children's sexual behavior and talked to many experts in the field as well as to teens and parents themselves. From these sources, it is clear that there is much parents and adults can do to reduce the risk of kids becoming pregnant before they've grown up. Presented here as "ten tips," many of these lessons will seem familiar because they articulate what parents already know from experience—like the importance of maintaining strong, close relationships with children and teens, setting clear expectations for them and communicating honestly and often with them about important matters.

By the way, research clearly shows that talking with your children about sex *does not* encourage them to become sexually active.

So What to Do???

- 1. Be clear about your own sexual values and attitudes.** Communicating with your children about sex, love, and relationships is often more successful when you are certain in your own mind about these issues.
- 2. Talk with your children early and often about sex, and be specific.** Kids have lots of questions about sex, and they often say that the source they'd most like to go to for answers is their parents. Start the conversation, and make sure that it is honest, open, and respectful. If you can't think of how to start the discussion, consider using situations shown on television or in movies as conversation starters. Tell them candidly and confidently what you think and *why* you take these positions; if you're not sure about some issues, tell them that too. Be sure to have a two-way conversation, not a one-way lecture. Ask them what *they* think and what they know so you can correct misconceptions. Ask what, if anything, worries them.
- 3. Supervise and monitor your children and adolescents.** Establish rules, curfews, and standards of expected behavior, preferably through the process of a family discussion and respectful communication. If your children get out of school at 3pm and you don't get home from work until 6pm, who is responsible for making certain that your children are not only safe during those hours, but also are engaged in useful activities? Where are they when they go out with friends? Are there adults around who are in charge? Supervising and monitoring your kids' whereabouts doesn't make you a nag; it makes you a parent.
- 4. Know your children's friends and their families.** Friends have a strong influence on each other, so help your children and teenagers become friends with kids whose families share your values. Some parents of teens even arrange to meet with the parents of their children's friends to establish common rules and expectations. It is easier to enforce a curfew that all your child's friends share rather than one that makes him or her different—but even if your views don't match those of other parents, hold fast to your convictions.

5. **Discourage early, frequent, and steady dating.** Group activities among young people are fine and often fun, but allowing teens to begin steady, one-on-one dating much before age 16 can lead to trouble. Let your child know about your strong feelings about this throughout childhood—don't wait until your young teen proposes a plan that differs from your preferences in this area; otherwise, he or she will think you just don't like that particular person or invitation.
6. **Take a strong stand against your child dating another child who is significantly older than he or she is.** Older teens can seem glamorous to a younger teens—sometimes they even have money and a car! But the risk of matters getting out of hand increases when one is much older than the other. Try setting a limit of no more than a two- (or at most three-) year difference. Large differences in age between younger teens and older teens can lead to risky situations, including unwanted sex and sex with no protection.
7. **Help your teenagers to have options for the future that are more attractive than early pregnancy and parenthood.** The chances that your children will delay sex, pregnancy, and parenthood are significantly increased if their future appears bright. This means helping them set meaningful goals for the future, talking to them about what it takes to make future plans come true, and helping them reach their goals. Explain how becoming pregnant—or causing pregnancy—can derail the best of plans. Community service, in particular, not only teaches job skills, but can also put teens in touch with a wide variety of committed and caring adults.
8. **Let your kids know that you value education highly.** Encourage your children to take school seriously and set high expectations about their school performance. School failure is often the first sign of trouble that can end in teen parenthood. Be very attentive to your children's progress in school and intervene early if things aren't going well. Keep track of your children's grades and discuss them together. Meet with teachers and principals, guidance counselors, and coaches. Limit the number of hours your teenager gives to part-time jobs (20 hours per week should be the maximum) so that there is enough time and energy left to focus on school. Know about homework assignments and support your child in getting them done. Volunteer at the school, if possible.
9. **Know what your kids are watching, reading, and listening to.** The media can be sending the wrong message to your teens. Sex rarely has meaning, unplanned pregnancy seldom happens, and few people having sex ever seem to be married or even especially committed to anyone. Is this consistent with your expectations and values? If not, it is important to talk with your children about what the media portray and what you think about it. If certain programs or movies offend you, say so, and explain why. Be "media literate"—think about what you and your family are watching and reading. Encourage your kids to think critically: ask them what they think about the programs they watch and music they listen to. You will probably not be able to fully control what your children see and hear, but you can certainly make your views known and control your own home environment.
10. **These first nine tips for helping your children avoid teen pregnancy work best when they occur as part of strong, close relationships with your children that you built from an early age.** Strive for a relationship that is warm in tone, firm in discipline, and rich in communication, and one that emphasizes mutual trust and respect.