



Tips for Parents to Help Children Avoid Teen Pregnancy

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Sexuality can be a difficult topic for adoptive and foster parents to bridge with their children, who according to some research studies are vulnerable to unplanned pregnancies. By age 19, nearly half of young women in foster care have been pregnant compared to about one-fifth of their peers who are not in foster care. Nearly half of teen girls in foster care who have been pregnant have had a subsequent pregnancy, compared to 29% of their peers outside of the system.

Researchers theorize that self-fulfilled prophecies and repeating a family history may be contributing factors. One complexity is that the children may know they were the result of an unplanned pregnancy or that their birth parents had multiple births despite not being able to care for their children. The challenge for parents is to help youth sort out how they are similar to and can be a different set of parents to their own children, often confronting complex issues of sexuality in a truthful and supportive way.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy has reviewed recent research about parental influences 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 that 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. Research supports these common sense lessons that are not only good ideas, but they can help teens delay becoming sexually active, as well as encourage those who are having sex to use contraception carefully.

Finally, although these tips are for parents, they can be used by adults more generally in their relationships with teenagers. Parents, especially those who are single or working long hours, often turn to other adults for help in raising their children and teens. If all these caring adults are on the same "wavelength" about the issues covered here, young people are given more consistent messages.

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. To help clarify your attitudes and values, think about the following kinds of questions:

- What do you really think about school-aged teenagers being sexually active-perhaps even becoming parents?
- Who is responsible for setting sexual limits in a relationship and how is that done, realistically?
- Were you sexually active as a teenager and how do you feel about that now? Were you sexually active before you were married? What do such reflections lead you to say to your own children about these issues?
- What do you think about encouraging teenagers to abstain from sex?
- What do you think about teenagers using contraception?

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.

Age-appropriate conversations about relationships and intimacy should begin be just one conversation about all this - you know, "the talk." The truth is that parents and kids should be talking about sex and love all along. This applies to *both* sons and daughters and to *both* mothers and fathers, incidentally. All kids need a lot of communication, guidance, and information about these issues, even if they sometimes don't appear to be interested in what you have to say. And if you have regular conversations, you won't worry so much about making a mistake or saying something not quite right, because you'll always be able to talk again.

Many inexpensive books and videos are available to help with any detailed information you might need, but don't let your lack of technical information make you shy. Kids need as much help in understanding the *meaning* of sex as they do in understanding how all the body parts work. Tell them about love and sex, and what the difference is. And remember to talk about the reasons that kids find sex interesting and enticing; discussing only the "downside" of unplanned pregnancy and disease misses many of the issues on teenagers' minds.

Here are the kinds of questions kids say they want to discuss:

- How do I know if I'm in love? Will sex bring me closer to my girlfriend/boyfriend?
- How will I know when I'm ready to have sex? Should I wait until marriage?
- Will having sex make me popular? Will it make me more grown-up and open up more adult activities to me?
- How do I tell my boyfriend that I don't want to have sex without losing him or hurting his feelings?
- How do I manage pressure from my girlfriend to have sex?
- How does contraception work? Are some methods better than others? Are they safe?
- Can you get pregnant the first time?
- In addition to being an "ask-able parent," be a parent with a point of view. Tell your children what you think. Don't be reluctant to say, for example:
- I think kids in high school are too young to have sex, especially given today's risks.
- Whenever you do have sex, always use protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases until you are ready to have a child.
- Our family's religion says that sex should be an expression of love within marriage.
- Finding yourself in a sexually charged situation is not unusual; you need to think about how you'll handle it *in advance*. Have a plan. Will you say "no"? Will you use contraception? How will you negotiate all this?
- It's okay to think about sex and to feel sexual desire. Everybody does! But it's not okay to get pregnant/get somebody pregnant as a teenager.
- One of the many reasons I'm concerned about teens drinking is that it often leads to unprotected sex.
- (For boys) Having a baby doesn't make you a man. Being able to wait and acting responsibly does.
- (For girls) You don't have to have sex to keep a boyfriend. If sex is the price of a close relationship, find someone else.

By the way, research clearly shows that talking with your children about sex does *not* encourage them to become sexually active. And remember, too, that your own behavior should match your words. The "do as I say, not as I do" approach is bound to lose with children and teenagers, who are careful and constant observers of the adults in their lives.

3. Supervise and monitor your children and adolescents. Establish rules, curfews, and standards of expected behavior, preferably through an open process of family discussion and respectful communication. If your children get out of school at 3 pm and you don't get home from work until 6 pm, 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 of 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. Welcome your children's friends into your home and talk to them openly.

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 the particular person or invitation.

6. Take a strong stand against your daughter dating a boy significantly older than she is. And don't allow your son to develop an intense relationship with a girl much younger than he is. Older guys can seem glamorous to a young girl-sometimes they even have money and a car to boot, but the risk of matters getting out of hand increases when the guy is much older than the girl. Try setting a limit of no more than a two- (or at most three-) year age difference. The power differences between younger girls and older boys or men can lead girls into 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 futures appear 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. Tell them, for example, that if they want to be a teacher, they will need to stay in school in order to earn various degrees and pass certain exams. It also means teaching them to use free time in a constructive way, such as setting aside certain times to complete homework assignments. Explain how becoming pregnant-or causing pregnancy-can derail the best of plans; for example, child care expenses can make it almost impossible to afford college. 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 teenage 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. Schools want more parental involvement and will often try to accommodate your work schedule, if asked.

9. Know what your kids are listening to, watching and reading. The media (television, radio, movies, music videos, magazines, the Internet) are full of material sending the wrong messages. Sex rarely has meaning, unplanned pregnancy seldom happens, and few people having sex ever seem to be married or even especially committed to anyone. 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. 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 the music they listen to. You can always turn the TV off, cancel subscriptions, and place certain movies off limits. 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 are 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. There is no single way to create such relationships, but the following habits of the heart can help:

- Express love and affection clearly and often. Hug your children, and tell them how much they mean to you.
- Praise specific accomplishments, but remember that expressions of affection should be offered freely, not

just for a particular achievement.

- Listen carefully to what your children say and pay thoughtful attention to what they do.
- Spend time with your children engaged in activities that suit their ages and interests, not just yours. Shared experiences build a "bank account" of affection and trust that forms the basis for future communication with them about specific topics, including sexual behavior.
- Be supportive and be interested in what interests them. Attend their sports events; learn about their hobbies; be enthusiastic about their achievements, even the little ones; ask them questions that show you care and want to know what is going on in their lives.
- Be courteous and respectful to your children and avoid hurtful teasing or ridicule. Don't compare your teenager with other family members (i.e., why can't you be like your older sister?). Show that you expect courtesy and respect from them in return.
- Help them to build self-esteem by mastering skills; remember, self-esteem is earned, not given, and one of the best ways to earn it is by *doing* something well.
- Try to have meals together as a family as often as possible, and use the time for conversation, not confrontation.

**A final note: it's never too late to improve a relationship with a child or teenager.
Don't underestimate the great need that children feel--at all ages--for a close
relationship with their parents and for their parents' guidance, approval, and support.**

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