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# MODERN

# Love

TALKING WITH YOUR KIDS ABOUT SEX, RELATIONSHIPS AND VALUES IS AWKWARD, CONFUSING AND DIFFICULT.

AND IT'S OKAY IF YOU DON'T FEEL READY. WE'LL HELP YOU TELL THEM EVERYTHING YOU WANT THEM TO KNOW.

BY KAREN TROCCOLI

Photo: Awalt/Zetaly/Corbis



**Expect the unexpected.** Of all people, I should know that. But I nearly drove off the road when my then-8-year-old daughter started asking about sperm banks. "I mean," she said, "is it like Wachovia or something?" And days later, when my 11-year-old son declared he knew his father and I had "done it" twice because we have two kids, I had to quickly take a deep breath so I wouldn't laugh out loud.

It's not as if I haven't had plenty of experience with kids and unfiltered moments like these. I've been working in the field of teen health and sexuality for 18 years. Yet I still sometimes have trouble talking to my own two children about sensitive subjects—and I know that it can be even tougher for other parents.

Yet we can't let our discomfort keep us from speaking to them about these important topics because the stakes are just too high. Kids today are facing an onslaught of sex-related information—and misinformation—that simply wasn't out there when we were teens. The news blares intimate details about people. This week a famous teen gets pregnant. Next week a politician has been caught cheating on his wife. At home, plugged-in teens (and even tweens), unwittingly or deliberately, happen upon raw, graphic images online. They may listen to music lyrics boasting sexual conquests and check out Facebook pages to see who is this week's winner in the relationship wars. Maybe they open their cell phones to find they've been "sexted"—sent explicit photos of peers. Or they

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watch TV shows like *Gossip Girl*, where having multiple partners is no big deal.

"There's more information coming at kids faster, and at the same time, families have so many activities that there are fewer opportunities to sit down and talk about what they're experiencing," says Elizabeth Casparian, Ph.D., executive director of HiTOPS, a youth health center in Princeton, New Jersey. "I don't think parents fully realize the risks and challenges today's kids are facing." And teens are taking risks: Forty-six percent of ninth- to twelfth-graders report having had sexual intercourse, according to a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (The older the teen, the more likely he or she is to have had sex.) Yet other research shows that half of the parents of sexually experienced eighth- to eleventh-graders are unaware that their teens have had sex.

### FC FACTS

- 31% of women were pregnant at least once before age 20.
- 60% of teens who have had sex wish they had waited.
- 29% of girls and 31% of boys say they've never had a conversation with a parent about sex.

Sources: [thenationalcampaign.org](http://thenationalcampaign.org)

lem. What also troubles experts are the emotional causes and consequences. The most obvious example of this is hooking up. "Kids are engaging in sexual behavior, looking for fun without any of the emotional baggage," says Laura Sessions Stepp, author of *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both* (Riverhead Books). "They

may interact with one person once or many times. It can range from kissing to oral sex to intercourse and anything in between. The partner may be someone a kid just met. Or the two may already know each other—and become 'friends with benefits.'" This use of sex as recreation worries experts, because of the potential for psychological repercussions kids don't anticipate. "Girls end up very depressed," says Stepp. "They think they decided not to feel anything for the guy, but they do. When nothing happens after the hookup, they feel bad about themselves."

**What's the answer?** There is a powerful antidote to the information glut and the too-much-too-soon behavior: You. "Teens consistently say that their parents have the most influence over their decisions about sex—not the media, not their boyfriend or girlfriend and not their best buds in school," says Sarah Brown, CEO of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. "But if parents don't step up to the plate, teens are going to get information that's unedited, without context and often incorrect—from wherever they can find

it." Not ideal. So are you ready to have the first and last word on how your children learn about sex, relationships and intimacy? These guidelines will help you give your kids what they need.

**Forget about "the talk."** There is no eve-of-the-13th-birthday sit-down at the kitchen table. Instead, you need to establish an ongoing dialogue. "Kids can absorb only so much at any one time," says Casparian. "They need to hear things, think about them and come back again to ask or talk from a different perspective." The opportunities are everywhere once you start looking for them. While you're driving the carpool, for instance, kids may discuss TV shows, parties or social situations at school. Later you can say to your child, "I couldn't help overhearing you and your friends in the car, and I was wondering what you thought about..." And they need you to address all the themes relevant to sex. "The conversation can't be just about biology. It also has to be about values, ideas, beliefs, experiences and respect," says Brown. Which means it isn't enough just to lay down the law, observes Barbara Fick, a Bethesda, Maryland, mother of three, ages 14, 9 and 7. "I think too many parents only make rules, like you can't date, and then think they've talked to their kids about sex," she says. "Then kids go behind their parents' backs because they're afraid of getting into trouble."

## Quick study

TO BE SURE YOU'RE GIVING YOUR KIDS THE BEST INFO, ASK YOURSELF:

- Am I covering all the right topics?** Have you talked about biology but left out contraception? What about dating? "It's not enough just to tell your kids what you think," says Sarah Brown. "It's even more important to say why." Kids need to understand your reasoning so they can learn to figure things out on their own.
- What will I say if my child asks me about my sex life?** Answer with the simple truth: "Some things are private, but I'd be glad to talk about why you're interested."
- What if I don't know the answer or say the wrong thing?** Just admit your ignorance and offer to find the information for them or help them find it. Kids respect honesty. Plus, giving them inaccurate information damages your credibility. If you didn't say what you meant to, circle back and say, "I was thinking about our conversation and realized what I meant to say was..."

Photo: Jo McRyan/Getty Images

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Suzi Peterson Steward, a mother in Ann Arbor, Michigan, says she's had her best successes keeping things casual. "I often bring topics up with my 17-year-old daughter when we're cooking," she says. "She acts as if she's just allowing me to blather on, but later she'll ask a related question, which shows me she's processing what we've talked about." However you get the conversation going, be sure to keep it two-way. "Zero in on what they're asking and why, and give short, simple replies," suggests Casparian. "If you lecture and don't listen to their responses, they'll tune you out."

**Avoid knee-jerk reactions.** One reason kids don't ask parents about sex is they're worried you'll automatically assume they're having it. Peppering them with "are you or aren't you?" questions will likely derail the conversation and make them less likely to come to you in the future. Conversely, avoid assuming that your kids aren't having sex if they aren't talking about it. If they do bring it up, a good first response is, "I'm happy you felt you could ask me that." Then see where your teen steers the conversation. And between talks, always monitor who they're with, where they are and what they're doing so you can initiate conver-

sations when you feel it's warranted. You could say, "You may feel like I'm prying by asking you some questions about sex, but because I'm your parent I need to make sure you're not putting yourself in harm's way."

### Give males equal time.

Adults used to think these issues mattered more for girls. But parents need to reject that stereotype, along with the "boys-will-be-boys" attitude. "Not talking to guys sends the message that girls are the only ones responsible for keeping it all safe," says Casparian. What's more, adolescent males need help dealing with huge pressures from peers. "They're afraid their male friends will call them a 'wuss' if they turn down an interested girl," says Stepp. Similarly, a boy may have to deal with a girl who thinks provoking his interest in her will prove she's valuable and attractive. "Parents often don't recognize how sexually aggressive some girls are," says Rosalind Wiseman, a *Family Circle* contributing editor and author of *Queen Bee Moms and Kingpin Dads* (Crown). "Boys need to be

### FOR MORE INFO

Prepare by increasing your own knowledge. Try these sources:

- ✓ *Sex and Sensibility: The Thinking Parent's Guide to Talking Sense About Sex* (Da Capo Press)
- ✓ *Third Base Ain't What It Used to Be* (New American Library)
- ✓ *From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children* (Newmarket Press)
- ✓ [talkingwithkids.org](http://talkingwithkids.org)
- ✓ [teenpregnancy.org](http://teenpregnancy.org)

clear that saying no is a real option and that it doesn't mean that there is something wrong with them."

### Exploit the media.

Headlines about public figures; reports about teens and STI's or pregnancy; and local stories about kids in trouble for sexting are great conversation-starters. Call attention both to positives (loving, respectful behavior) and negatives (thoughtless, abusive or

irresponsible actions). "Two-thirds of teens report that television shows and characters make them think about the consequences of sex," says Bill Albert, chief program officer at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. "Use it to your advantage." As in, "What did you think about that girl's decision?" "How do you think that boy handled that situation?" Music lyrics are also useful, says Molly Love, outreach coordinator and social worker at Teen and Young Adult Health Connection, in Silver Spring, Maryland. "Keep the car radio tuned in to their favorite station and ask your teens what they think of the lyrics," she says.

### Face the discomfort.

Yours, that is. And theirs. Nobody said this was going to be easy, but it doesn't have to be torture either. Accept that you're going to have some missteps—and that you can always backtrack and make corrections. More important than being perfectly poised and absolutely articulate is giving kids essential info, listening, talking about why we have the values we do and keeping the conversation going.

**Believe in your kids.** I have great faith in my two—and in kids in general. If they get the information they need, I really do think they can learn to make good decisions. ●

## No shame, no blame

PARENTS HAVE ALL KINDS OF REASONS FOR NOT TALKING WITH THEIR KIDS. HERE ARE FIVE COMMON ONES—AND THE REAL STORY.

- 1 Kids are getting so much information from their friends and the media, they won't listen to us.** Yes, they will. They want to hear from you. And the information you give them is more likely to reflect your values.
- 2 They get what they need at school.** A few hours a week in health class can't—and shouldn't—substitute for talks with parents about complex topics like relationships, intimacy and sex.
- 3 If I talk about sex with my teens, they'll think it's okay to have it.** No, actually, the exact opposite is true. The research shows that teens who talk with their parents are more likely to wait.
- 4 If kids don't ask, they must already know enough or not be interested.** All kids have curiosity, questions and concerns. Don't wait for them to break the silence. Be parental and take the lead.
- 5 I'll have to talk about my own sex life.** Kids don't want to know that you even have a sex life. They just want guidance for their own lives.