

Ten Tips for Parents

To Help Their Children Avoid Teen Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy has reviewed 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 parents and adults can do to reduce the risk of teen pregnancy.

Many of these ideas presented here 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 ideas. We hope that these tips can increase the ability of parents to help their children pass safely into adulthood pregnancy-free.

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 clear in your own mind about these issues. To help clarify your own 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? Is abstinence best for teens?

Who is responsible for setting 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?

Is abstinence best for teens? What do think about teens using contraception?

2. Talk with your children early and often about sex, and be specific. Young people have lots of questions about sex, love, and relationships. And they often say that the source they'd most like to go 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 TV or in the movies as conversation starters. Tell teens candidly and confidently what you think and *why* you believe what you do. If you're not sure about some issues, tell them about 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 early in a child's life and continue through adolescence. Resist the idea that there should be just one conversation about all this — you know, “the talk.” Think 18 year conversation. The truth is that parents and kids should be talking about sex and love all

along. This applies to *both* sons and daughters and mothers and fathers. All teens need large amounts 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, 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.

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, 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. Welcome your children's friends into your home and talk to them warmly and openly.

5. Discourage early, frequent, and steady dating. Group activities among young people are fine and often fun, but allowing teens to begin one-on-one dating much before age 16 can lead to trouble. Let your child know about your strong preference 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. 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 older boys or men and younger girls 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 son or daughter will delay having 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. 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 might make it almost impossible to afford college. Community service, in particular, can not only teach 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 child to take school seriously and set high expectations about their school performance. School failure is often the first sign of trouble and can end in teenage parenthood. Be very attentive to your child's progress in school and intervene early if things aren't going well. Keep track of your children's grades in school and discuss them together. Meet with teachers and principals, guidance counselors, and coaches. Limit the number of yours your teenagers gives to part-time jobs (20 hours a 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 watching, reading, and listening to. The media (television, radio, movies, music videos, magazines, the Internet) are chock full of material sending the wrong messages. Sex rarely has meaning, unplanned pregnancy seldom happens, and no one who is having sex ever seems 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 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 a strong, close relationship with your children, that is 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 warmth and love 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 child engaged in activities that suit his age and interests, not just yours.

Shared experiences build a “bank account” of affection and trust that forms the basis for future communication with him about specific topics, including sexual behavior.

Be supportive and be interested in what interests them. Attend her sports events; learn about his hobbies; be enthusiastic about her 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, using 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 warm relationship with their parents and for their parents’ guidance, approval, and support.

Be an “askable parent.” 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?

And, 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 religious tradition 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.
(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 the 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 that *your* own behavior should match your words.