



8 TIPS FOR TALKING WITH YOUR TEENS ABOUT SEX, LOVE, & RELATIONSHIPS

African-American teens want what all teens want: to have candid, open conversations with their parents about relationships, love, sex, and contraception. Science says that talking with teens about sex and contraception does not encourage them to become sexually active—in fact, it helps them delay sex. Below are tips for parents and other adults to help the teens in their lives avoid too-early pregnancy and parenthood, based on decades of research and on insights from *Under Pressure: What African-American Teens Aren't Telling You About Sex, Love, and Relationships*, our joint survey with ESSENCE.

- 1 Parents are #1.** Teens from every racial and ethnic group consistently say that parents influence their decisions about sex more than their friends, the media, or even their boyfriends/girlfriends do. Teens believe in the power of parent-teen conversations. Those who aren't talking to parents say it's because it's too awkward (42%) and that they don't know how to bring it up (23%). The truth is that starting the conversation is the parent's job. And even if it's awkward to talk about sex and birth control, it's a lot better than finding out your teen is pregnant (or has gotten someone pregnant).
- 2 Be clear and start early—before dating and sex are a reality.** Black youth say they most want to hear from parents about sex and relationships when they are still in middle school and early high school (ages 13-15); preferably before there is a boyfriend or girlfriend in the picture and definitely before they are sexually active. The fact is that steady, one-on-one relationships before age 16 can lead to trouble. Start talking early: nearly half (47%) of 13-15 year-olds say that when it comes to deciding whether or not to have sex, parents are most influential; but that drops to 17% among 19-21 year-olds. There's really no such thing as "The Talk." Think of it as lots of age-appropriate conversations that evolve over time. Don't be afraid to have a clear point of view: if you believe that your teens should delay sex until they are at least out of high school, and that it's not OK to get pregnant or get somebody pregnant as a teenager, say so! And then help them understand why your expectations are what they are.
- 3 Teens want to hear about relationships more than anything else.** Parents need to be their teens' first and best teachers about all things, and it's no different when it comes to talking about love, sex, and how to tell them apart. Young people ages 13-21 agree that learning "how to have a good relationship" was the topic that they most (47%) wanted to hear about from their parents. If worrying that you have to be a biology expert keeps you from talking openly with your teens, remember: there are lots of valuable resources out there to help you discuss the specifics about birth control, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). But you are the only one who can teach your children your values, your expectations, and how to respect themselves and others. Check out www.TheNationalCampaign.org for more parent tips and resources.



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- 4 Talk to your sons as well as your daughters.** The 750,000 teenage girls who get pregnant in the U.S. each year don't do it alone. Be sure that you're teaching your sons as well as your daughters about resisting the pressure to have sex and avoiding pregnancy and parenthood. More than four in 10 (42%) black youth say that parents are more likely to tell daughters not to have sex than they are to tell their sons the same thing. But boys feel pressured to have sex and need to be reassured that they, too, can say "no" to sex—and that having a baby doesn't make you a man, acting responsibly does. Many young women believe that having sex with a guy is a way to keep him in a relationship; the truth is that 79% of guys agree that "having sex with someone won't make me stay in a relationship I don't want to be in." When they are ready for relationships, make sure that both guys and girls stick with partners close to their own age. Age differences of two or three years or more can mean power differences that lead to risky sexual situations.
- 5 Contraception only works if you use it every single time.** Parents need to teach teens that "sometimes" or "most of the time" doesn't cut it when it comes to protection. Almost half (45%) of survey respondents who have had sex admit that they don't use contraception consistently or they don't use it at all. Almost four in 10 girls (38%) say this is because their partner doesn't want them to use protection, and nearly one in three girls (29%) say it's because the topic is too embarrassing to bring up with their partner. If your teens are not comfortable insisting on protection, they are not ready to be having sex. In fact, the only 100% foolproof way to avoid pregnancy is not to have sex at all. However, if your teens are having sex, they must commit to using contraception correctly and carefully every single time. Go to www.StayTeen.org for teen-friendly information on delaying sex and contraception.
- 6 Knowledge is necessary but not sufficient. Help your teens have a plan for what to do "in the moment."** Even if your teens know the facts about how to avoid pregnancy, they will find it difficult to put that knowledge into action if they haven't thought beforehand about how to handle a sexual situation. Nearly half (45%) of black teens who have had sex say they have been pressured to go further sexually than they wanted to. The heat of the moment is no time to start thinking about saying no to sex or figuring out how to insist on using protection. You won't be there to help them during a potentially intimate moment, so it's critical that you help them figure out what they will do when a sexual situation occurs. If they are worried that saying "no" will lead to hurt feelings, or if they are too uncomfortable to talk about contraception, they are NOT ready for sex. Remind them: you can always say "no" to sex, even if you've said "yes" before.
- 7 Give them good reasons to resist the pressure to have sex, including attractive options for the future.** Your children are more likely to delay sex, pregnancy, and parenthood if they feel that they have meaningful goals for the future and a way to reach them. While nine out of 10 black youth expect to succeed in life and 91% feel valued by their parents, they still need help, support, and encouragement to reach their goals. Black youth feel tremendous pressure to have sex at a young age: nearly half (48%) of those ages 13-15 say they feel pressure from society to have sex, and more than half (54%) of guys say they feel pressure from their friends to have sex. Giving in to this pressure can lead to risk, regret, and long-term consequences. In fact, 30% of black youth who have had sex say they wish that someone had told them before they had sex for the first time that they have much more to offer someone than sex. Even though you can't give your teens self-esteem, you can give them opportunities to earn it and realize what they can accomplish. Explain that one of the best ways to be sure they can finish school and achieve their future goals is to do whatever it takes now to delay pregnancy and parenthood until they are older, stable, and ready to start a family.
- 8 Use the media to start conversations about your own views and values.** If you need help starting a conversation with your teens about sex and relationships, begin by using scenarios in their favorite TV shows and movies. Watch what they're watching—together if possible. Black youth report that the media they consume portray black teens as sexually aggressive (73%), and that it's OK for black girls (54%) and guys to have many sexual partners (74%). Most (74%) wish their media showed more of the consequences of sex. Whether or not the shows and movies your teens watch reflect your beliefs, take the opportunity to say what you think and to explain why. Encourage your teens to think critically: what would they do if they were in situations like those on their favorite TV show? Has something that is happening on TV happened to a friend of theirs? Use pop culture and the media to spark discussions about your own views and values, and to help teens separate fact from fiction.

Your teens want to hear from you. It's never too late to start.