



1133 SE 18th Place
Suite 1
Ocala, FL 34471
352.433.2633 TEL
352.433.2644 FAX

Adolescent Sexual Health Tips

Ways to Influence Your Teen's Sexual Risk Behavior



- Teens sometimes engage in behaviors that increase their risks of illness, injury, and early death.
- Engaging in sexual risk behaviors—such as having sex at an early age, having more than one sex partner, and not using condoms or other contraceptives—can lead to unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV infection.
- Teens are influenced by their parents' values, beliefs, and expectations of appropriate behavior.
- Research has largely focused on mothers. However, recent findings suggest that parents may parent in ways that differ from mothers, and therefore represent an additional opportunity to support the health and well-being of their teens—separate from the influence of mothers.
- This fact sheet provides information and guidance for parents on how to help their teens avoid sexual risk behaviors.

Parental monitoring includes

1) the expectations parents have for their teen's behavior; 2) the actions parents take to keep track of their teen; and 3) the ways parents respond when their teen breaks the rules.

What can you do to help your teen avoid sexual risk behaviors?

As the parent of a teen, you can—

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1. Monitor and supervise your teen.

- Be well-informed about your teen’s daily activities, friends, and whereabouts.
- Set up family rules to guide your teen’s behavior. You may want to include your teen in discussions about appropriate rules and their enforcement.
- Make sure your teen understands what your expectations are (e.g., time to be home on a school night, age they can go on a date, adult supervision at parties, and no alcoholic beverages or drugs).
- Check in regularly to be sure your teen is following the rules.
- Consider positive ways you can encourage your teen to follow the rules.
 - Praise your teen when he or she follows the rules.
 - When your teen breaks a rule, follow through with fair and consistent discipline that makes sense to your teen.

2. Be involved in your teen’s life.

- Get to know your teen—what he or she likes and does.
- Spend time with your teen by enjoying shared activities (e.g., going on walks, playing sports, biking, shopping, listening to music, traveling, etc.).
- Take time to listen and gather information about your teen’s life.
One of the most important ways to connect with your teen is to understand his or her world.

3. Talk with your teen.

- Be available to talk with your teen and do so regularly.
- Talk about the importance of making healthy decisions.
- Discuss the consequences of risky sexual behavior.
 - Encourage your teen to ask you questions; be prepared to give fair and honest answers.
 - When your teen shares personal information with you, don’t overreact. Your teen is asking for your input and wants to know how you feel. Let your teen know you value his or her opinion, even if it is different from yours.

4. Share your values.

- Be a good role model. Be aware of your own behavior, and show your teen how he or she can be healthy and avoid risks.
- Build a positive relationship with your teen. The emotional closeness of your relationship with your teen, your attitudes toward teen sex, and your level of involvement with your teen can make a difference in reducing your teen’s sexual risk behavior.



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Adolescence is a time for development and discovery, which can be both positive and challenging. As teens try to find their own identity, they make choices that affect their health, both now and in the future. By following these key practices, you can build a quality relationship with your teen and be a positive influence in helping your son or daughter make healthy decisions and avoid sexual risk behaviors.

Where can you get more information?

- Division of Adolescent and School Health — Adolescent Health page www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/adolescenthealth/index.htm
- The Center for Latino Adolescent and Family Health (CLAFH) www.clafh.org
- National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy www.teenpregnancy.org/
- Girl's Health — Parent/Caregiver section www.girlshealth.gov/parents/
- KidsHealth www.kidshealth.org/parent/
- Parents of Teens www.usa.gov/Topics/Parents_Teens.shtml.
- Parents Sex Ed Center www.advocatesforyouth.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=108&Itemid=206
- PBS Parents: Talking With Kids About Health www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/health
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Fatherhood Initiative www.fatherhood.hhs.gov

Talk with Your Teen About Preventing STDs

The Basics

Overview

Talk with your teen about how to prevent STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) — even if you don't think your teen is sexually active.

If talking about sex and STDs with your teen makes you nervous, you're not alone. It can be hard to know where to start. But it's important to make sure your teen knows how to stay safe.

How do I talk with my teen?

Use these tips to help you talk to your teen about preventing STDs:

- Think about what you want to say ahead of time

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- Be honest about how you feel
- Try not to give your teen too much information at once
- Use examples to start a conversation
- Talk while you are doing something together
- Get ideas from other parents

You can also ask your child's doctor to talk with your teen about preventing STDs. This is called STD prevention counseling.

STD Facts

Why do I need to talk with my teen?

All teens can use accurate information about how to prevent STDs. Teens whose parents talk with them about sex and how to prevent STDs aren't more likely to have sex. But they are more likely to make healthy choices about sex when they're older.

In fact, teens say that their parents have a bigger influence on their decisions about sex than the media, their siblings, or their friends.

[Find out more about why it's important to talk to your kids about sex.](#)

Young people are more likely to get STDs.

More than half of all STD cases in the United States happen in young people ages 15 to 24 years. Teens are at a higher risk than adults of getting STDs for several reasons. For example, they may:

- Not know they need tests to check for STDs
- Not use condoms correctly every time they have sex
- Have sexual contact with multiple partners during the same period of time

Some LGBTQ teens may also be at higher risk for STDs.

What do I need to know about STDs?

STDs are diseases that can spread from person to person during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Some STDs can also spread during any kind of activity that involves skin-to-skin sexual contact.

STDs are sometimes called STIs, or sexually transmitted infections. Examples of STDs include genital herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV.



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These diseases are very common. Although many STDs can be cured, they can cause serious health problems if they aren't treated. Many STDs don't have any symptoms, so the only way to know for sure if you have an STD is to get tested. [Learn more about STDs](#) .

Prevention

What do I tell my teen about preventing STDs?

Talk to your teen about what STDs are and how to prevent them. Use the facts and resources below to talk with your teen.

It's important to learn about STDs and how they spread.

Knowing the facts helps teens protect themselves. Check out these websites together:

- [STDs — for Teens](#)
- [Information for Teens and Young Adults: Staying Healthy and Preventing STDs](#)

Complete abstinence is the only sure way to prevent STDs.

Complete abstinence means not having any kind of sexual contact. This includes vaginal, anal, or oral sex and skin-to-skin sexual contact. Complete abstinence prevents STDs.

[Discuss this information about abstinence](#) with your teen.

Condoms can help prevent STDs.

Make sure your teen knows how to use condoms — even if you don't think they're sexually active. Offer to help get condoms if your teen doesn't know where to go. Share these resources:

- [Condoms — for Teens](#)
- [External \(sometimes called Male\) Condom Use](#)
- [Internal \(sometimes called Female\) Condom Use](#)

It's important for teens to talk with their partners about STDs before having sex.

Encourage your teen to talk with their partner about STD prevention before having sex. Say that you understand it may not be easy, but it's important for your teen to speak up. These tips can help:

- [Talking to Your Partner About Condoms — for Teens](#)
- [Talking to Your Partner About STDs — for Teens](#)
- [STD Testing: Conversation Starters](#)

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Testing

Your teen may need to get tested for STDs.

Ask your teen to talk honestly with the doctor or nurse about any sexual activity. That way, the doctor can decide which tests your child may need. For example, sexually active teens may need to get tested for:

- [Chlamydia and gonorrhea](#)
- [Syphilis](#)
- [HIV](#)

It's important to help your teen develop a trusting relationship with the doctor or nurse. Step out of the room to give them a chance to ask about STD testing and prevention in private.

This is an important step in teaching teens to play an active role in their health care. [Get more tips on helping teens take charge of their health care](#) .

Keep in mind that your teen can get tested for STDs at the doctor — or go to a clinic. To find an STD clinic near you:

- [Enter your Zip code to find a local testing site](#) .
- Call 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636).

Other Topics to Discuss

How can I talk to my teen about preventing pregnancy?

It's also important for all teens to know about preventing pregnancy. Check out these resources with your teen:

- [Choose the Right Birth Control](#)
- [Contraception Explained: Options for Teens & Adolescents](#)
- [About Birth Control — for Teens](#)

How can I help my teen build healthy relationships?

Families have different rules about when it's okay for teens to start dating. Whatever your rules are, the best time to start talking about healthy relationships is **before** your teen starts dating.

Help your teen develop healthy expectations for relationships. [Get tips for talking to your kids about healthy relationships](#).



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Talking with Your Teens about Sex

Learn ways parents can have meaningful discussions with their teens about sex, relationships, and the prevention of HIV, STDs, and pregnancy

This fact sheet offers practical actions for parents to help strengthen their efforts to engage positively with their teens and to have meaningful discussions with them about sex. This information complements other available parent resources by emphasizing the importance of talking with teens about sex and healthy relationships.



Parenting a teen is not always easy. Youth need adults who are there for them—especially parents* who will connect with them, communicate with them, spend time with them, and show a genuine interest in them. Talking with teens about sex-related topics, including healthy relationships and the prevention of HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and pregnancy, is a positive parenting practice that has been widely researched.¹ A number of programs in a variety of settings (e.g., schools, parents' worksites) have been shown to increase the amount and quality of communication between parents and their teens.²⁻⁴

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Does talking with teens about sex make a difference?

According to teens, the answer is “yes.” In national surveys conducted by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, teens report that their parents have the greatest influence over their decisions about sex—more than friends, siblings, or the media. Most teens also say they share their parents’ values about sex, and making decisions about delaying sex would be easier if they could talk openly and honestly with their parents.⁵

According to many researchers, the answer is “yes.” Studies have shown that teens who report talking with their parents about sex are more likely to delay having sex and to use condoms when they do have sex.⁶ Parents should be aware that the following important aspects of communication can have an impact on teen sexual behavior:⁷

- what is said
- how it is said
- how often it is said
- how much teens feel cared for, and understood by, their parents

What can parents do?

When parents communicate honestly and openly with their teenage son or daughter about sex, relationships, and the prevention of HIV, STDs, and pregnancy, they can help promote their teen’s health and reduce the chances that their teen will engage in behaviors that place them at risk. Following are some actions and approaches parents might take to improve communication with their teens about these challenging, hard-to-discuss health concerns.

What topics should parents discuss with their teens?

It’s important that your conversations with your teen not focus just on the consequences of risky sexual behaviors. Many teens receive these messages in health education classes or elsewhere. As a parent, you have the opportunity to have discussions with your teen about other related topics. You can

- Talk about healthy, respectful relationships.
- Communicate your own expectations for your teen about relationships and sex.
- Provide factual information about ways to prevent HIV, STDs, and pregnancy (e.g., abstinence, condoms and contraception, and HIV/STD testing).
- Focus on the benefits of protecting oneself from HIV, STDs, and pregnancy.
- Provide information about where your teen can speak with a provider and receive sexual health services, such as HIV/STD testing.



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How can parents improve their communication skills?

Various organizations have developed programs to help build parents' skills and improve parent-adolescent communication. These skill-building programs may be implemented in schools, health clinics, community-based settings, and even places where parents work (see Table 1 for selected examples). Parents, educators, health care providers, community-based staff, and employers can work together to promote positive communication between parents and adolescents about sex.

Where can parents get more information?

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Positive Parenting Practices](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Teen Pregnancy: Parent and Guardian Resources](#)
- [Raising Healthy Kids: An Asset-Based Check-in for Parents](#)
- [The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Parent-adolescent communication about sex in Latino families: a guide for practitioners](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Healthfinder.gov. Talk to Your Kids about Sex](#)

Sexual Risk Behaviors



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Engaging in risky sexual behaviors can lead to HIV infection, sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancy among youth.

Youth Engage in Sexual Risk Behaviors

Many young people engage in health-risk behaviors and experiences that can result in unintended health outcomes. CDC [data](#) show protective sexual behaviors (i.e., condom use, sexually transmitted disease (STD) testing, and HIV testing), experiences of violence, mental health, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors worsened from 2011 to 2021.

Implementation of CDC's [What Works In Schools](#), a three-strategy school-based program, can lead to reductions in these risk behaviors and experiences and improve student health.

Fast Facts

Among U.S. high school students surveyed in 2021¹

- 30% had ever had sexual intercourse.
- 48% did not use a condom the last time they had sex.
- 8% had been physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to.
- 9% of all students have ever been tested for HIV.
- 5% of all students have been tested for sexually transmitted diseases during the past year.

Source: National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2021

CDC recommends everyone aged 13-64 get tested for HIV at least once as part of routine medical care.^{5,6}

HIV, STDs, and Teen Pregnancy are Health Consequences

Sexual risk behaviors place youth at risk for [HIV infection](#), other [STDs](#), and [unintended pregnancy](#):

HIV

20% of all new HIV diagnoses were among young people (aged 13–24) in 2020.²



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STDs

More than half of the nearly 20 million new STDs reported in 2020 were among young people (aged 15–24).³



Teen Pregnancy

More than 145,000 infants were born to adolescent females in 2021.⁴



Abstinence from vaginal, anal, and oral intercourse is the only 100% effective way to prevent HIV, other STDs, and pregnancy. The correct and consistent use of male latex condoms can reduce the risk of STD transmission, including HIV infection. However, no protective method is 100% effective, and condom use cannot guarantee absolute protection against any STD or pregnancy.

Schools and Youth Serving Organizations Can Help

[School health programs](#) can help young people adopt lifelong attitudes and behaviors that support their health and well-being—including behaviors that can reduce their risk for HIV and other STDs.

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HIV, STD, and teen pregnancy prevention programs in schools should:

- Provide health information that is basic, accurate, and directly contributes to health-promoting decisions and behaviors.
- Address the needs of youth who are not having sex as well as youth who are currently sexually active.
- Ensure that all youth are provided with effective education and skills to protect themselves and others from HIV infection, other STDs, and unintended pregnancy.
- Be developed with the active involvement of students and parents.
- Be locally determined and consistent with community values and relevant policies.

National Strategic Plans

- The [National HIV/AIDS Strategy](#) calls for all Americans to be educated about HIV. This includes knowing how HIV is transmitted and prevented, and knowing which behaviors place individuals at greatest risk for infection. HIV awareness and education should be universally integrated into all educational environments.
- The [Sexually Transmitted Infections National Strategic Plan](#) aims to reverse the recent dramatic rise in STIs in the United States. Using health education to prevent STIs, schools, other professionals, and families can help adolescents make informed, positive, and safe choices about healthy relationships, responsible sexual activity, and their reproductive health.

CDC Programs & Initiatives

The prevalence of some health behaviors remains high and puts youth at higher risk for negative health outcomes and poor [academic performance](#). CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health addresses HIV, other STDs, and unintended pregnancy prevention through

- [Data collection and analysis](#)
- [Science-based approaches](#)
- [Funding to state and local departments of education and national nongovernmental organizations](#)
- [Evaluation](#)
- [Successful state and local interventions](#)
- [Partnerships](#)

Resources

- [Get Tested: National HIV and STD Testing Resource](#)
- [Get Yourself Tested Campaign: STD Awareness Resource](#)
- [Health Education Curriculum Analysis Tool \(HECAT\)](#)
- [HIV](#)

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- [How Schools Can Support HIV Testing Among Adolescents](#)
- [STDs](#)
- [What Works In Schools](#)