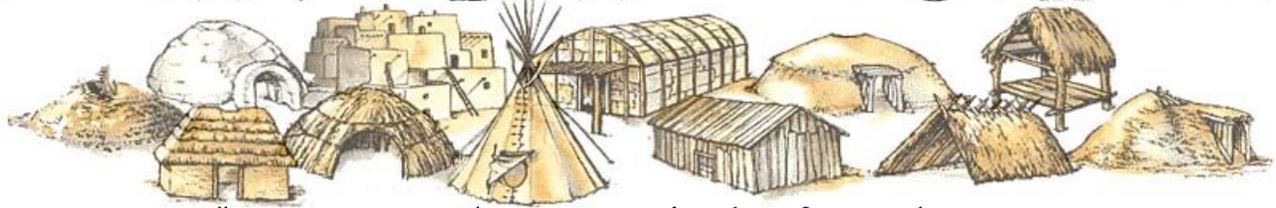


There's No Place Like Home . . . for Sex Education



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Talking to Teens

"I've never really talked much with my daughter about sex. But she's in 10th grade... it's a little late now, don't you think? Anyway, she'll learn what she needs to in health class."

It's never too late to talk with your child about sex. True, the ideal is to begin when they're small. Still, your input is valuable at all stages of your child's development. And few schools provide comprehensive sex education these days.

Teens need to know more than just sexual facts. They want answers about the intangibles of sex. They're curious about the emotions, about values and morals; they want support with relationship pressures and expectations; they're confused about sexual feelings and urges; they wonder about love.

Much of what they'd really like to know is highly personal. Surveys and talking circles have shown that teens wish they could ask mom and dad.



You wonder... **why don't teens just ask?** A major obstacle is **fear of being judged:**

- ◆ *"If I asked my dad about sex, he'd think I was doing it!"*
- ◆ *"I'm still trying to figure out my own feelings about sex... like when is the right time, who's the right person, and all that. My parents have pretty set ideas: you only have sex if you're married...period. I'm not sure if I agree with that, but I wouldn't try to talk to them about it. They'd just get mad."*
- ◆ *"I think my parents would really be hurt if I didn't agree with their views about sex. So I don't talk about it."*

Other teens avoid the subject because they think parents won't take them seriously:

- ◆ *"My folks still think I'm a kid, and that kids don't need to know this stuff."*
- ◆ *"If I even hint that I think some guy at school is cute, mom teases me. No way could I have a serious discussion with her about sex."*

Could some of these concerns be getting in the way for your teen? Imagine sitting down with your 10th grader and saying something like this:

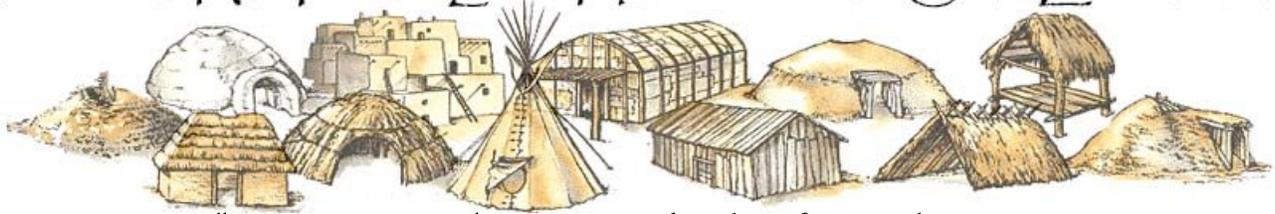


"I really do care how you feel about things, and I understand we won't always agree. That's ok. Just because we have different views doesn't mean our relationship is going to fall apart. I love you. I hope you can come to me with your questions, concerns, ideas - no matter what the subject: sex, drugs, relationships, school. I'll do my best to listen, to understand, and help if I can. I don't often talk to you about these sorts of things because I wouldn't want you to think I'm grilling you. But I am interested, and I'm here if you need me."

Opening doors

No matter what your child's age, it's never too late to open doors. There may be disagreements on important issues. Can you accept that... and still keep the doors open? Seen through adult eyes of experience, your teenager's concerns may seem trivial. Can you accept that, and still treat those concerns seriously? While your input is wanted and needed, ultimately your teenager has to take charge, be allowed to grow, and trusted to make personal decisions. Can you accept that, knowing that in the process s/he may choose differently from you, or that s/he will make mistakes? It takes effort to open doors and keep them open - extra effort if parents and kids have not talked much about these personal issues in the past. But do try now. Parents have so much to offer... and young people are so eager to know.

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What's a Parent To Do!?

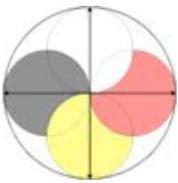
This parenting business is an awesome task ... awesome as in stressful, challenging, rewarding, scary, delightful, frustrating, powerful, and incredibly BIG... all at the same time. Wanting the best for their children, parents struggle to find the right answers, deliver the appropriate guidance and create the ideal experiences. And as parents face the awesomeness of parenthood; their kids face the awesomeness of "kidhood," which can be intense too.

Specific to sexuality, the confusion and anxieties of both parents and teens reach new heights. No longer is it as simple as, "What about pregnancy?" Sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/ AIDS, abortion... the stakes are high at a time when many young people are sexually active and sexually ignorant.

Gaining knowledge and skills to make responsible sexual decisions is one of the most important challenges facing teens. Parents cannot guarantee right answers, appropriate guidance, and ideal experiences. Even if they could, there are no guaranteed results. Parents can, however, build the odds in their children's favor:

1. BE A HEALTHY, POSITIVE ROLE MODEL

Watching their own parents and other caring adults relate with one another, teens learn about love and intimacy. Through your behavior, you can teach your children how to create mature, loving relationships (and how to cope with difficult ones). Help them see that sex is wonderful, AND it has its place as part of the larger picture. Emphasize commitment, love and communication as some of the other critical pieces.



Married and single parents alike can model loving, honest relationships. The value of such example is clear. According to Dr. Sol Gordon, an expert in the field of sexuality education:

"The quality of love and caring by parents or other important adults in a child's life is the single most significant component of a child's sex education."

2. REMAIN CONNECTED



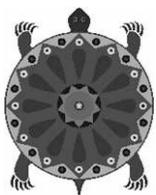
Parental expressions of love, attention and support do not lose their importance or appeal during the teen years. While they may not directly request - and may at times resist - signs of affection from mom and dad, **teenagers need to hear and feel they are loved.** Hugs, kisses, a squeeze of the hand, a pat on the back - whatever is agreed upon - **please stay "in touch" with your teen.** Experiencing family love and support builds a young person's sense of self worth and can reduce the need to seek love, touch and human connection in less healthy ways.

3. PROMOTE A SENSE OF THE FUTURE



Help your teenager plan and reach goals. Encourage dreams, ambitions and exploration of career opportunities (avoiding stereotyped male/female options). Vision and goals for a bright future will encourage responsible choices.

4. PAY ATTENTION TO THE PROCESS

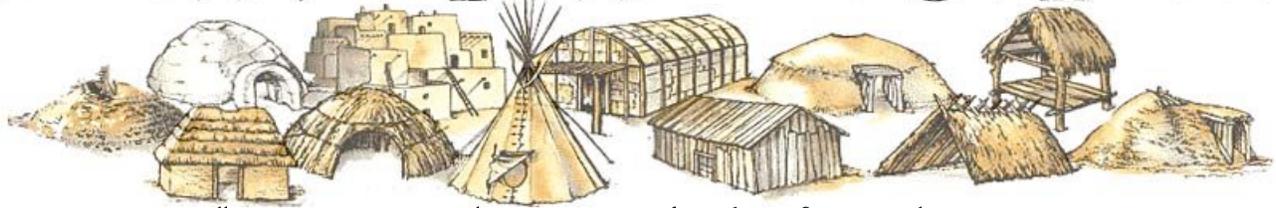


Growing up is just that - a process. Great opportunities for learning and insight occur all along the way. They're easily missed if adolescence is viewed as a race or survival course, the sole purpose being to get to the end.

Help your teen take the process slowly, to remain attentive and to recognize that it's the experience of the process — appreciation of and learning from growth — that results in true knowledge, awareness and maturity.

Children raised with firm roots in their tribal traditions have special tools to help them journey through adolescence.

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Coming of Age in a Different World

Our ancestors certainly didn't face the kinds of challenges today's teens do. Even our parents and grandparents didn't feel the intense pressures of the media, sexually transmitted diseases, and drugs/alcohol the way today's teens do. Traditionally, young couples were chaperoned until families decided they were allowed to marry. Marriage at age 13 or 14 was typical and pressures to have sexual relationships outside the bounds of a committed relationship were practically non-existent. Think about it, at the age our youth are thinking about having intimate relationships, our ancestors were married and raising children. It is a different world now. Postponing sexual activity is an expectation in many families but often young people aren't taught how to deal with the strong sexual urges that accompany these teenage years.

Try asking your teen what s/he thinks about some of the alternatives to having intercourse. How does your teen define "having sex" or being "sexually active"? Have you asked? Many teens *who do not consider themselves sexually active* are participating in mutual masturbation, heavy petting, oral and even anal sex. Wow. As adults, we define these activities

under the category of "having sex" but a lot of young people don't. Does your teen know the associated risks and options for protection?

It can be very difficult to talk about these issues with your children. Acknowledge that to them. By doing so, you relieve some of the pressure and show that you are committed to helping them understand these important topics.

In talking to your teen, you might explain that in many Native cultures, masturbation is almost universally practiced and considered a method of self-control in response to powerful sexual urges. Though you may expect your teen to have perfect discipline and self-control, the reality is that without awareness of alternatives, many teens turn to intercourse as their only option.

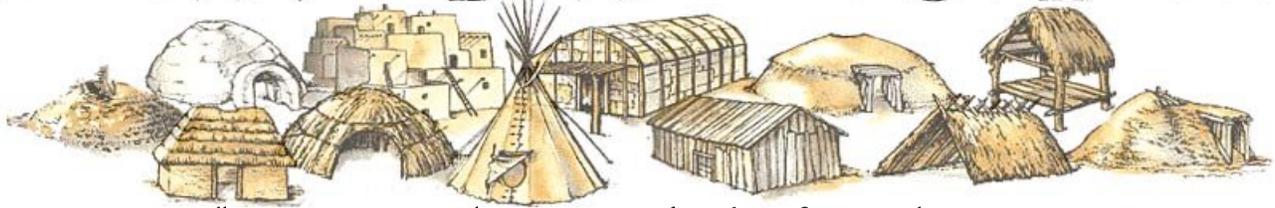
Talk about the options with your teen. **Though commonly discussed with young men, few young women are informed about masturbation as an alternative to oral, anal or vaginal sex with a partner.** Many consider

masturbation to be a natural and normal part of being a sexual being. Hopefully, you can get past the discomfort to have a frank conversation about this.

Our youth are growing up in a different world, much different even from the world we grew up in. The challenges of coming of age in this different world call us to find support in our cultural and tribal values. We owe it to our youth to prepare them to face the challenges of their generation with the best factual information available.



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The Art of Setting Limits

Young people need and want limits. Sure, they grumble, complain, and generally storm about the house insisting: **"That's not fair! You're treating me like a baby! The other kids aren't treated like this."** To which a typical (ineffective) parent response is often: **"I don't care about the other kids. I care about you!"**

Sound familiar? It could be an instant replay of your own teen years. Remember the lines you swore you'd never use if you became a parent?

"As long as you live in this house, you live by my rules."

"So all the other kids stay out late. You're not the other kids."

"I don't have to give you a reason. I said 'no.' That's all there is to it!"

Groan. More and more you use those very words you found frustrating as a teenager. You're not trying to be unreasonable. It's just that you're a parent, with years of life experience, 20-20 hindsight, and memories of being in 10th grade. You want to protect your child. **And if you're totally honest, you might admit that you fear losing whatever control you may have left over this "soon-to-be-young-adult."**

You know all about teen pregnancies, children having children, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV and AIDS. You feel somewhat justified retreating to the tactics your own folks used with you - the absolute rules enforced for your own good.

Yet you know strict prohibitions can backfire. Rigid dictates with no room for negotiation often create rebellion in teens. Parents can't realistically lock them up. Sure, you can try to keep them from experimenting with sex by refusing to allow dating or by imposing strict curfews. Though well-intentioned, such attempts are frequently misguided and futile.

Consider: Research has shown that for young people, sex often happens at home, after school, when mom and/or dad are at work or not around. It would seem **more useful to agree on expectations for unsupervised times and after school activities:** a routine of homework, chores, organized programs, sports, etc.

You could insist that no friends be in the house without an adult... and your child may complain:

"I can't believe this! Don't you trust me?"

...to which you could respond:

"I do trust you. And it's my job to help you avoid difficult situations you may not be able to handle."

Be up front about your concerns and the basis for your decisions. "Because I'm your parent, that's why!" is ineffective and can trigger resentment and anger.

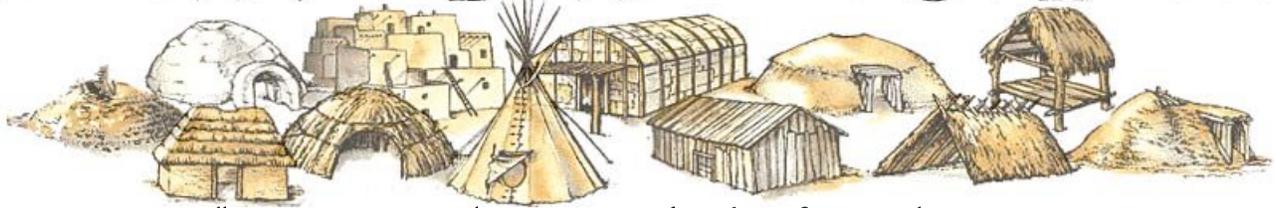


Try this: *"I know sexual urges and feelings can be so powerful. It's important we agree on some limits which will help you stay in control of your decisions."*

Help your 10th grader set reasonable limits for socializing with friends. **Suggest ways to reduce the potential for problems:** parties must be chaperoned, no alcohol or drugs, dating in groups, etc. Remember, **when kids help set the rules they're more likely to comply. AND, they learn from the process.**

Parents want to minimize the chances of kids getting into situations they're not ready to handle. Young people want to avoid that risk too. Yet they may not have developed skills to anticipate or negotiate those situations. So they're relieved to have the limits, and grateful to use mom and dad as an excuse when they need one. Of course, they won't admit to appreciating the boundaries, but that too is part of being a teenager... remember?

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Why Should the School Take a Parent's Place as Sex Educator?



It shouldn't! In an ideal world, parents and kids would talk together about sexual issues with ease, grace and comfort. Conversations would be open; accurate information would be presented, values shared, and positive, healthy attitudes toward sexuality promoted. In an ideal world.

The reality is, both parents and kids are looking for assistance with this sex education business. More so than ever before, parents recognize the importance of providing children with the information and skills they need to understand and appreciate sexuality. During the teenage years, certain issues become even more pertinent: peer pressure, dating, sexual decision-making, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV...

In the past, "just say 'no'" might have been enough. It's certainly easier when they're 10. You simply say, "*You're not ready for sex. Period.*" But what do you say when they're 17 or 18?

Parents realize that, given the times we live in, "just say 'no'" is no longer enough to offer our teens. Parents realize that part of their job is to teach adolescents about handling challenges when mom and dad aren't around. Parents are wanting help with this, and increasingly, they seek that help from the schools.

Studies show that nearly 90% of parents favor sex education in the schools. Yet ironically, fewer than 10% of students nationwide receive comprehensive sexuality education programs. **Usually sex education in schools is far too little, far too late.** And these days, the huge influx of federal dollars (\$170 billion in 2005 alone!) for abstinence-only-until-marriage education has resulted in many schools abandoning effective programs that help teens make informed, healthy decisions about sex.

Young people deserve accurate, balanced sex education that offers information and teaches the skills they need for their health and safety – whether they choose to have sex or not. It's important that parents let their school boards and administrators know that they value that kind of education for their children

Active parent involvement in the curriculum process is an education and an opportunity. It allows for the building of agreement and trust with regard to both the content and quality of the program.

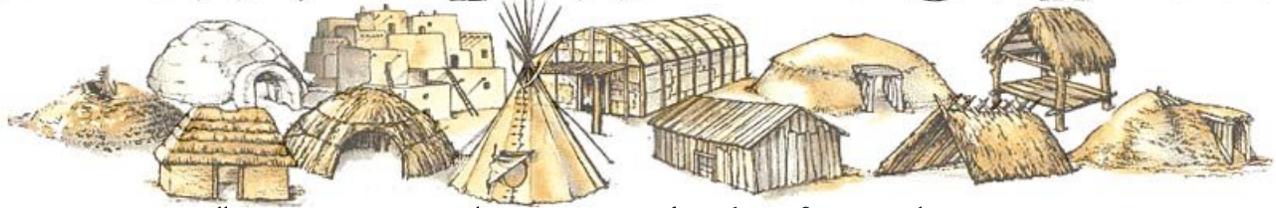
And the outcome?

Research shows that comprehensive school-based sexuality education can make a difference. It can:

- increase knowledge
- increase parent/child communication
- enhance negotiating, communication and decision-making skills
- help teenagers resist premature, exploitive or unprotected sexual experiences
- give sexually active teens the information and confidence to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases

Those are noble achievements. As parents and schools work in partnership for the sexuality education of youth, our children reap the benefits. They emerge the winners. So does the family, communities, tribes, and society as a whole.

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Sex is more than "Plumbing": Lessons from a Parent-Teen Talking Circle

The program was entitled *"Let's Talk About Sex."* The purpose was to bring parents and teens together and help them find ways to discuss sexual issues with each other in more comfortable, honest and thoughtful ways. **When asked why sex is so hard to talk about**, they described embarrassment, uncertainty and lack of information.

Parents worried that giving too much information could encourage sexual activity...

"My folks never talked to me about sex. I turned out ok," one dad offered.

"But it's different today," said another. *"Teens have sex at younger ages, become pregnant, get abortions, have babies... they need information! I'm just not sure how to give it."*

Teenagers feared their parents' judgment...

"I'm not having sex, but if I start asking a lot of questions, my parents might think I am."

"Most kids who are having sex know their parents would be furious if they knew. They're not going to talk about it!"

One young man added, *"Adults get kind of preachy about what they think is right for their kids. Nobody likes getting preached at. Anyway, it doesn't work."*

Interestingly enough, **when asked how well their own families communicate about sex, parents and teens had very different opinions.** Parents saw themselves as more open and willing to discuss sexual issues than their kids did. The teenagers assumed mom or dad wouldn't want to talk about it, so they didn't bother to ask. Many agreed that parents covered the basics of sex... "the plumbing": menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, etc. But **they wanted to know so much more!** "Like what?" the teens were asked. **"What else do you wish you could discuss with your parents?"**

What an eye opener! Here are some of their responses:

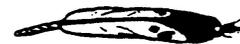
- What's wrong with teens having sex if they really care about each other and if they use protection?
- How does a person know if s/he's gay? Can s/he change?
- How do you know what to do when you have sex?
- My best friend thinks she has some kind of STD. Nobody else knows. What do I say to her?
- I know a girl whose boyfriend forced her to have sex with him. He said she lead him on. Is that rape?

Parents were amazed at the depth and complexity of the issues. It hadn't occurred to them that 15-year-olds wondered about some of this stuff. **"I'm not sure what to say,"** one mother exclaimed. She was not alone.

It was useful for parents and teens to hear from each other about the anxieties and discomforts that might get in the way of talking together about sexuality. To parents, teens suggest: **"Listen, as well as talk; please respect our differences; discuss, don't preach; don't wait for us to ask."** And the parents advised teenagers: **"Listen, as well as talk; please respect our differences; discuss, don't argue; Don't wait for us... ASK!"**



Be Aware: Date/Acquaintance Rape



If your 11th grader is becoming more interested in relationships and dating, it's a good time to discuss yet another difficult issue: date rape. Statistics tell us that 70-90% of all rape victims were either dating or at least acquainted with the rapist. One third of the victims were teenagers.

Here are a few pointers to share with your teens:

- Say what you mean – firmly, confidently and clearly.
- Set limits before any sexual expression takes place.
- You can say "no" at any point.
- "No" means "no" – not "maybe."
- No one owes sex to a date.
- Trust your feelings.
- Avoid being alone with someone you do not know well.
- Beware of someone who does not take "no" for an answer on other issues.
- **It is NEVER ok to force ANY sexual behavior on someone.**