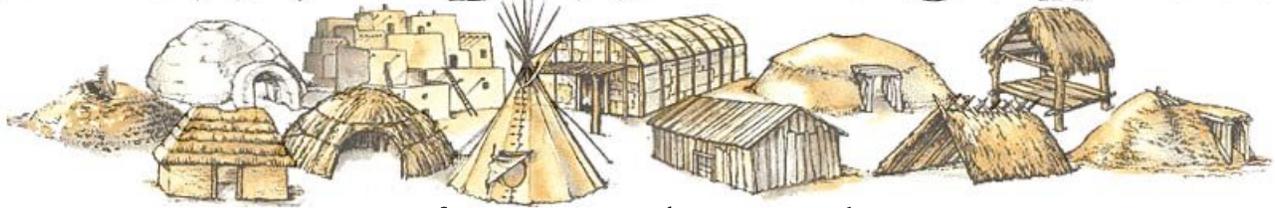


# There's No Place Like Home . . . for Sex Education



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## Share Your Wisdom

Adolescence is not a disease. It is a time of explosive growth and development at many levels. Love and patience are tested to the limits. Teens are like chameleons: one day wise, mature and responsible; the next day inappropriate in their behavior, lacking in sound judgment.

Not a particularly good time for sex to enter the picture. Yet, at this stage, it often does. Studies show that almost half of all 17-year-olds have had sexual intercourse. Typical, everyday kids: from all social, economic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Just like the kids next door. Just like *your* kids. **Maybe you should talk.**

OK, so it's hard. You acknowledge that, and go on. What do you say? It's up to you. **You're the expert when it comes to your family values and beliefs around sexuality.** You may need help gathering your ideas or forming the words. But you do know what to say. Look into your heart. What messages do you have for your children? What do you wish for them?

As you consider this, remember that a lot of 16-17 year olds wonder:

### **What's wrong with teens having sex as long as they're responsible?**



You might suggest that responsibility goes far beyond preventing pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Many believe sex is for marriage, or at least for the adult years. Parents need to share their beliefs about this with their children. Whether or not the kids agree, it still needs to be said.



You might talk about whether teens are emotionally ready for the intense impact that sex can have on a relationship. Initiating sex in the teen years usually results in more partners over time. Ask your teen to imagine the emotional effects of ending a relationship that included sexual intimacy. Add to this that more partners equal greater risk of exposure to STDs.

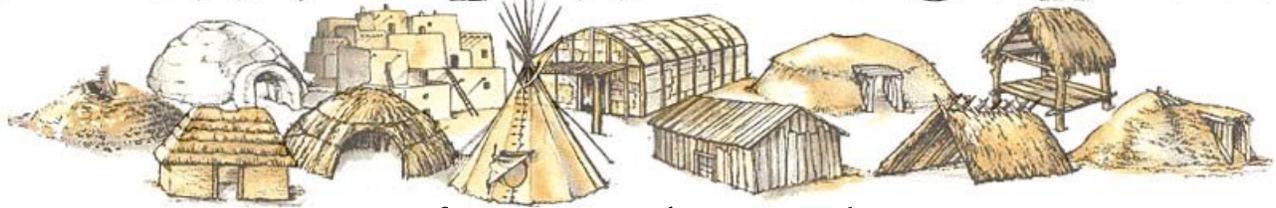


Parents know many good reasons why even "responsible" teens might choose to delay sex until they're older. Share those reasons with *your* teen. Throughout these discussions, reinforce your love for your children, no matter what they decide. And reinforce the importance of protection if and when they do have sex.

### **How can you tell if you're really in love?**

- ⊕ Talk about the difference between love and sex. **Sexual attraction creates powerful feelings which may be mistaken for love.** The passion of the moment can be overwhelming. People are "swept away," often with unfortunate results.
- ⊕ Love takes time and work. It's about respecting each other; sharing and communicating; wanting to be together; love is supportive and honors agreements; it doesn't pressure or coerce; it doesn't take advantage. **Love may or may not include sex.**
- ⊕ Teens get confused. They live with a language that calls "having sex" "making love," regardless of the relationship. They presume being "turned on" is the same as being "in love," and is therefore a justification for "making love." Nobody has bothered to explain the difference!
- ⊕ Explain the difference to your teen. S/he may say, "Come on, I already know this stuff!" Be persistent. Say something like, "I know you do, but bear with me, ok? I'm checking in to be sure I've got it straight."
- ⊕ At some point your child will be making choices about sex. Regardless of when that happens, it's important s/he have a clear understanding of issues like sex, love, infatuation, attraction, etc.

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## Talking About Abortion

Each year approximately 1.3 million abortions occur in the U.S.; about 1/5 are to teens. **Abortion is an intense, emotionally charged issue.** Individual views are affected by deeply held religious convictions, personal values, culture, life experiences, etc. Your teenager would welcome and benefit from your willingness to explore with them the facts, feelings and controversy around the issue.

Be thoughtful and accurate with your information. Misrepresenting facts in an effort to sway opinion one way or another is a disservice to teens. **Discussion about abortion should not be seen as a debate, or an attempt to challenge or change another's values.** Rather it is an opportunity to share information and personal ideas and to explore the complexities of the issue. It's an opportunity to listen as well as talk.

Abortion is a powerful social issue which is likely to affect your children, personally, at some point in their lives. They may confront that decision themselves one day, or a friend, loved one, or family member may face that decision. Certainly the more informed your children are, the more they can be of support, regardless of whether they agree with the ultimate choice. It's likely that within their lifetime, your children will be called upon to vote on an abortion related measure. They will want to be informed.

**Family discussion about abortion offers an ideal opportunity to address a vital, underlying issue: unintended and crisis pregnancies.**

The concept of planning for parenthood embodies the belief that children are important... certainly important enough to be consciously and carefully planned. **Children are far too special to allow them to happen by chance.** Yet we see hundreds of thousands of teenagers in this country becoming pregnant by chance...having babies by chance...

In our Native culture, life is celebrated and children are gifts from the Creator. Out of respect for past and future generations, we have an obligation to be sure that every child is wanted and loved. Expressing to our youth the importance of responsible sexual relationships at any age is critical.

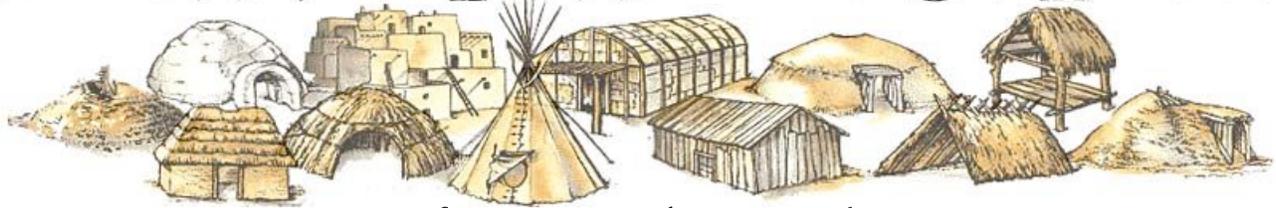
**Help your teenager appreciate the importance of pregnancy prevention**

The sharing of tribal values and cultural wisdom with our youth is a special gift for our youth. From the design of primitive condoms using animal skin to preventing a monthly cycle using herbs, our people have a long history of planning parenthood. Medicines and herbs for ending pregnancy were also used in some tribes. Built into our culture is the knowledge that everything has a balance, purpose, and cycle. One of the greatest strengths of our culture is the respect we have for life and balance. Even though it is very difficult, help your teenager learn about issues such as abortion, unplanned pregnancies, and pregnancy prevention. It will ultimately honor our people and strengthen our culture.



**Remember - preventing unplanned pregnancies is one of the best ways to prevent abortions.**

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## You Need To Talk: HIV/AIDS

Even families that openly talk about sexuality may have fewer discussions as children get older. Perhaps it's that the issues are more complex and value-laden. Not knowing quite what to say or how to say it, parents often avoid the subject.

Some parents mistakenly believe that kids, by their junior or senior year, pretty much know what they need to about sex. Nothing could be further from the truth! This assumption can, at best, lead to confused, misinformed youth, and at worst, sexually active, sexually illiterate youth at risk of pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and exposure to HIV.

**“HIV?” you say, “Surely teenagers don't need to be that concerned about HIV and AIDS... unless they're gay or injection drug users.” WRONG.** Interestingly enough, that's the same misconception many teens have. Let's clear it up for you *and* for them.

**By grade 11, your teenager needs the following information about HIV/ AIDS:**

1. AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV (human immunodeficiency virus). A person infected with HIV can pass the virus to another during unprotected vaginal or anal sex; by sharing needles (used for injecting drugs, steroids, vitamins) and possibly through oral sex.

2. HIV can be passed from an infected mother to her baby during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding.

3. HIV has been contracted through transfusions with infection blood or blood products. However, since 1985 all donated blood and blood products are screened for the virus, so the risk is very, very small. HIV is not contracted by donating blood.

4. Currently there is no cure for AIDS. Medications can greatly help some HIV+ people, but not all... and these medications are not a cure.

5. Even with no obvious symptoms, an infected person can still pass the virus.

6. HIV infection can be prevented. Abstaining from sex and needle sharing is the surest way. If a person has vaginal, anal or oral sex, the more sexual partners, the greater the risk; it's important to know the sexual history of any sexual partner; anyone who has engaged in unsafe sex practices should not be considered a safe partner; correct and consistent use of latex condoms offers great protection against infection (discuss the correct way to use a condom).

7. Sharing razors, needles or piercing and tattooing instruments is risky.

8. HIV is not spread by casual contact. It's safe to hug and touch an HIV+ person, share food, utensils, towels, etc. with them; you're not in danger if an HIV+ person coughs or sneezes on you; HIV is spread only through infected blood, semen, vaginal fluids or breast milk.

Contact your local Planned Parenthood or local health department for updated HIV/AIDS information.

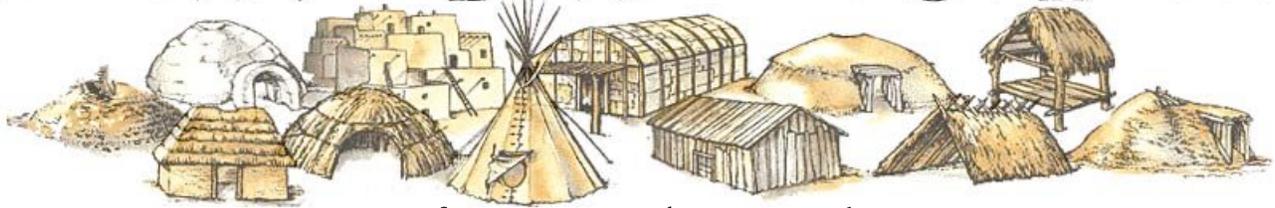
Difficult? Sure. Uncomfortable? You bet. But no one has ever literally “died” of discomfort. People – *teenagers* - have died, literally, from AIDS. **You need to talk.**

## HIV/AIDS in Native Communities

Think HIV/AIDS is not an issue in Native communities? Think again! AIDS is on the rise in Indian communities. The number of Indian AIDS cases has steadily increased from 322 cases in 1991 to 3,026 in 2003 ([Centers for Disease Control](#)). Sure, as family members, it is easier just to say, “My teen isn't having sex.” But the reality is that we don't always KNOW that. Help keep our youth safe by educating them about HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Your teen can reduce his/her risk of contracting the HIV virus by:

- abstaining from sex
- using condoms (latex rubber) when having vaginal or anal sex; using latex barriers with oral sex
- limiting his/her number of sex partners
- not sharing needles (that may be used with drugs, steroids, vitamins, tattoos or body piercing)

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## Nurturing Self-Esteem

Don't be fooled by the adult-like packaging or independence of your high school junior. Appreciate the progress, and remember that 11th graders are still in the thick of adolescence.

There are fluctuations - one day self-assured, insightful, responsible; the next, childish, self-centered, temperamental. These flip-flops cause confusion and frustration *for all*. Add to this the pressures, expectations, unknowns of the high school years - you see how your teen's self-esteem might need repairs.

The powerful influence of self-esteem cannot be overstated. Teens with confidence in their own self-worth are more likely to make positive decisions - about school, friends, relationships, sex, drugs - whatever! The parent's role in nurturing a child's self-esteem is critical. Studies have shown that Native teens with a positive self-image and knowledge of their culture are less likely to participate in high-risk activities. This means that cultural identity and self-esteem are key ingredients to the recipe for a healthy young adult.

This is not about heaping empty praise on your children. It's not about comparing your child to others: "I think you're better than... stronger than... smarter than..." This level of "support" won't serve to build true self-esteem. To be of real assistance, **help your child acknowledge personal value, abilities and strengths.**

Ask your teen to complete the following: "*I like myself because...*" S/he is to talk for a full minute, listing as many reasons as s/he can. Then, you feed back what you heard: "*You like yourself because...*"

Don't be surprised if your teen feels self-conscious or runs out of things to say before time is up. You may find yourself prompting, even *adding* items not mentioned by your child. They may be qualities you value in your child that s/he overlooks or doesn't believe are so. Discuss why self-acknowledgment is uncomfortable... and why it's so *important*.

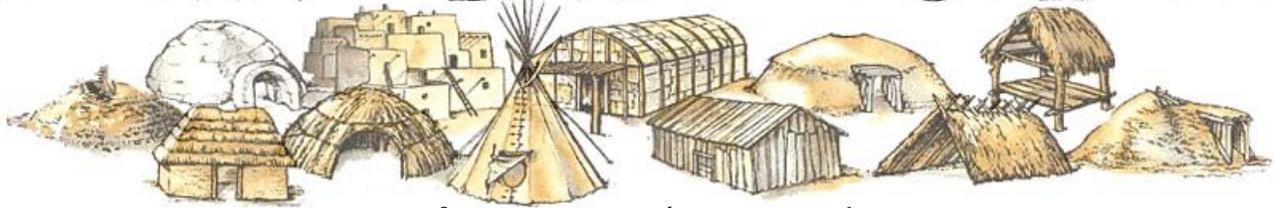


**Adolescence can at times be brutal on a young person's self-esteem.**

Some things you can do to help:

1. Point out the growth you've noticed by showing appreciation for good things your teen does and for improvements in behavior. If you want to increase the behavior, use positive reinforcement like: "**Thanks so much for remembering to call when you thought you would be late**" or "**That was really a grown-up way to handle that problem. I'm really proud of you for taking care of that on your own.**" By letting your teen know that you notice the good things s/he does, you will see more good behavior. And don't forget the importance of telling your child often: "I love you."
2. When a reprimand is in order, focus on the *behavior* as unacceptable, *not the person*. Remind your teen that even though you disapprove of his/her behavior, you still love him/her.
3. Help your teen process negative comments. Your daughter's friend says, "Dana, you jerk! You never keep your eye on the ball." Teach Dana to turn it around and say *what's really true*: "My concentration may not be as good today as it usually is. That doesn't make me a jerk." Your child may find it awkward to practice correcting negative comments, but it's important. **The more we quietly accept negative comments and personal slams, the more we come to hold them as true.**
4. Help your teenager deal with disappointments in ways that promote learning and acceptance. If your son doesn't get the lead in the school play, acknowledge his hurt and commend his effort. Help him plan for improving his skills.
5. **Urge your child to repeat image building statements (affirmations) everyday**, such as: "I am capable of making good choices." "I like and respect myself." "I have a good attitude."
6. **Work with your child to set short term goals at which s/he can be successful; give him/her the freedom to make decisions, take on responsibilities, make mistakes... and process the results of each.** With each success comes higher self-esteem. And **with higher self-esteem comes greater opportunity for a positive, fulfilling life.**

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## Yet Another Challenge

As usual, you checked the pockets of Mike's pants before washing them. This time you found a condom. Rushing off for school, Sara dropped her purse and out fell a brochure marked **Planned Parenthood Teen Birth Control Clinic**.

**How do parents respond to the suspicion that their 17-year-old might be having sex? What should they do? And not do?**

**First:** *breathe* ... slowly, deeply... taking time to move beyond the shock, anger - whatever the initial, gut reaction is. **Don't attempt a discussion when you're upset.**

**Consider the facts:** Mike has a condom. Is it to use or for show to impress his peers? The telltale "O" imprinted on a young man's wallet or back pocket is considered a mark of sexual experience. How much truth there is in that is anybody's guess.

And the brochure listing teen clinic services, hours, cost... maybe Sara got it in class the day a guest speaker talked about teen pregnancy. Maybe it's for a writing assignment. Or... maybe Sara *is* having sex.

**If you ever face this dilemma, don't leap to conclusions, but don't ignore the situation either.**

Take time to identify what you know vs. what you suspect. This lets you calm yourself, gather your thoughts, and do what must come next: talk with your teen.

Both parents (if possible) should first agree on the messages they want to present. Then share your concerns - *honestly* - with your teen. Emphasize the values, attitudes and expectations you hold about teens and sex. **Ask your teenager what s/he believes, and take those opinions to heart - even though you may disagree.**

If your teen is having sex:

- **Avoid** comments like "I'm crushed!" or "How could you do this?" Shaming and blaming will not help matters.
- **Focus on the behavior.** If you think teen sex is inappropriate or unwise or risky, say that - or whatever you believe. You can disapprove of the behavior without being disapproving of your child.

**Ultimately teens make their own decisions about sex.**

Parents can only do their best to inform, offer guidance and share values. If your teen *is* sexually active, ask that s/he examine the reasons and circumstances surrounding that choice. Discuss the relationship and level of commitment. Why has sex become part of it? Is there pressure for sex? Does s/he see any drawbacks? Explore possible implications. **Consistently reaffirm that you love and support your child even if you disagree with the behavior.**

Resist the urge to forbid your teenager to see his/her partner again. Rarely effective, this merely drives their relationship underground. Ultimatums and threats breed resentment, anger, resistance - none of which serve **the most important purpose: keeping communication open so you can help your child make wise decisions.**

Though they may not approve of the behavior, parents still have a responsibility to help children deal with the choice to be sexually active. Information is critical - about the emotional consequences and risks, about pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, contraception... *just as the sharing of feelings and values is critical.*

In the end, your teen may continue to be sexually active. Then again, s/he may see value in your arguments and choose to reconsider. Either way, the sharing and guidance which is so essential to your child's well-being can continue only if open communication is maintained. Stay calm, caring, and concentrate on that goal, and you just might be amazed at the results.