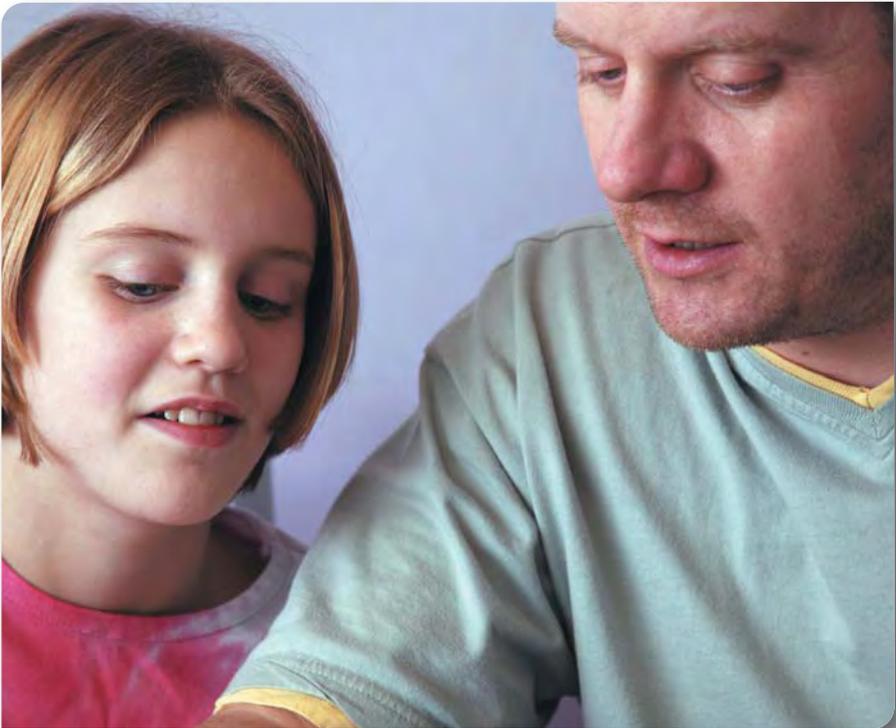




talking sense about sex

Puberty, relationships and sex

Talking to your children with confidence



Talking with confidence

Why is it important to talk to our children?

Children are naturally curious about their bodies and as they get older they want to find out about intimate relationships with others.

Talking openly and honestly with our children can help their emotional development, help them stay safe, and develop confidence, self-esteem and good communication skills. Additionally, good sex and relationships education can raise the age young people first engage in sexual activity. Children will learn about sex and relationships from any and every source – so it's important as a parent to talk about the subject with them yourself. Don't just have a one-off talk, build on it gradually. There are ways you can make it easier to talk to your child about sex and relationships, such as using TV storylines to spark off conversations, or using books, leaflets and reputable websites. People often find it easier to talk while doing something with their child, like washing-up, cooking together or driving.

At what age should I talk to my child?

- Age 3–4** Children aged 3 to 4 are aware and curious about the differences between the sexes. They are happy with short, simple, truthful answers. For example: Where do babies come from? (Mummy and daddy had a special cuddle). How do babies get in? (A seed meets an egg). Can men have babies? (Babies can only grow in a special place inside mummies' tummies).
- Age 5–8** Children aged 5 to 8 are curious about their own and other people's bodies, pregnancy and childbirth. They need to know about puberty and body changes so they're prepared before it happens to them. By this age they should know about periods and wet dreams, the proper names for genitals and how a baby is made.
- Age 9–13** Most children begin to show signs of puberty between 9 and 13. They become conscious of the differences between their bodies and those of their friends. They may become anxious about what is normal. At this age they're likely to want more information on: puberty; how their body is changing; sex and reproduction; sexual orientation; contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs); pregnancy choices; masturbation; and love and relationships.

Parents' worries and concerns

The internet

Anxieties about internet safety and the misuse of social networking sites is one of the top concerns of parents today. Many young people do learn about sex, positions and anatomy from pornography. This is one of the reasons why FPA believes sex and relationships education should be statutory. Children want to know how things work, and if they're not given the correct information through traditional routes, they'll find it out for themselves.

Pornography gives very distorted messages about the reality of sex, relationships and the body. Parents should talk about things like consent, sexual pleasure and body image with their older children or teenagers. You can't control them 24/7 but you can help them understand that pornography is an industry and it's not what sex and relationships are like in the real world.

Films and gaming

Something that comes up again and again for parents is sex and violence in films, gaming and the internet. Often these images portray poor attitudes towards women and a distorted view of masculinity. You can control what your children watch at home (but you may not be able to at their friends' houses). If you find they are viewing inappropriate material or materials which you think are sexually exploitative, be ready to discuss it with them and their friends' parents. Explain calmly why you think the game, DVD or programme is not appropriate.

Peer pressure

Peer pressure and fear of being the only one in a group who hasn't had sex is a very powerful factor in leading some young people to experiment sexually before they are ready. In reality, most young people don't lose their virginity until they're 16 or over. Any parent of a teenager will know that just telling them not to do something isn't a strategy that gets results. Good, honest, open communication will prove more successful over time. Your children need to know why it's best to wait until they are ready. This will help them to value themselves and others. It will help them build self-esteem, self-worth and ambition so they're less likely to be railroaded into something they don't want to do.

Puberty

Your experience

Talk with your children about how it was for you growing up. Did your parents discuss any aspects of sex and relationships with you, or did they leave you to find out for yourself? What do you think about that looking back on it? Many parents find these conversations help to strengthen relationships with their children and lay the groundwork for other conversations.

Puberty

Puberty takes place between the ages of 8 and 18. Signs of puberty include: girls growing breasts and starting their periods; the testicles and penis grow and the voice deepens in boys; both sexes will grow pubic and body hair.

As a parent you may naturally feel proud, sad, worried, or lots of different emotions about seeing your child growing and developing.

It's important you prepare your child for what's going to happen to them during puberty before it starts so they understand what to expect, and to reassure them.

How quickly and when puberty happens will vary from child to child. Your child may worry that their development is quicker or slower than their friends, but this is very normal.

Due to the dramatic hormonal changes going on, emotional as well as physical changes will take place. Your child may become moody, irritable or tearful, or feel intense emotions of love, exhilaration and happiness.

Again this varies from child to child and (many parents say) between siblings. Some children go through puberty hardly seeming to notice; others feel more affected by the ups and downs.

As a parent, building children's confidence in who they are as a person and how they look will help support them through the teenage years.

Homosexuality

Parents often tell us they wouldn't know how to respond if their child was gay or lesbian. Love and sexual relationships happen between people of the same sex as well as people of the opposite sex. The principles of supporting your child are the same, talk it through and help your children think about what matters in different types of relationships. Don't let embarrassment get in the way. Some parents may come from cultures and faiths that have taboos about homosexuality, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't discuss it. Whatever your background, children need the same information.

Contraception and STIs

Contraception

Contraception is used to prevent pregnancy and there are 15 different methods to choose from. These include hormonal methods (like the pill) and non-hormonal methods (like the IUD). Even if they're not having sex, your older children need to know about contraception, what the different methods are and where they can get contraception from. Remind them that even if they are using other methods of contraception they need to use condoms as well to help protect them from STIs. You can find out all you need to know about contraception from the FPA website. We also have a tool to help choose the most suitable method of contraception at www.fpa.org.uk/mycontraceptiontool.

Your child can get confidential contraceptive advice from specialist young people's clinics, contraception clinics, GPs, pharmacies or the school nurse. It's illegal to have sex under the age of 16 but clinics will give contraception and advice to young people under 16.

If you find condoms or pills belonging to your child it doesn't necessarily mean they're having sex so try not to jump to conclusions. Reassure your child that if they want to talk about relationships, or if they're thinking of having sex they can come to you. Keeping the lines of communication open will encourage your child to turn to you first for help and support. As a parent you'll feel different emotions about watching your child growing up and becoming a sexual being. Think about how you were at their age so you can share your experiences with them.

Sexually transmitted infections

STIs are passed to another person through vaginal, anal or oral sex and sharing sex toys. The only way to help protect yourself from STIs is to use a condom.

Even if they're not having sex you should talk to your child about condoms. Both young women and young men need to know how to put them on properly, where they can get them from and that condoms come in different shapes and sizes. You can buy condoms in pharmacies, supermarkets, shops and vending machines and get them free from sexual health services and genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics.

As a parent you can help your child feel confident about using condoms in new relationships and not to feel embarrassed about asking their partner to use one. Help them understand that you don't need lots of sexual partners to get an infection and you can't tell if someone has an STI by looking at them. Sexual health services will test for and treat all STIs as well as giving advice and information. You can find out more at the FPA website.

Further information

Contact FPA

For further advice and support contact the sexual health charity FPA who run an award winning programme, Speakeasy, supporting parents to talk to their children about sex and relationships.

www.fpa.org.uk/factsoflife

FPA enquiry service

England helpline 0845 122 8690 – 9am to 6pm Monday to Friday

Northern Ireland helpline 0845 122 8687 – 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday

Or Ask WES online at www.fpa.org.uk

Need a clinic? Text FPA to 81066.

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