



by Amy Levine, MA

SEX 101

Talking with your tween about sexuality can help, not hurt.

Many parents and caregivers worry that talking with their kids about sex and contraception will encourage them to have sexual intercourse. But the truth is that many young people feel pressure to have sex, and say that having conversations with their parents and caregivers will make it easier for them to postpone sexual activity. Clearly communicating your family's values and beliefs about abstinence can help your kids postpone sexual involvement. Also, if you talk with your children about contraception, they will be more likely to use it when they do become sexually active. So, talk soon, talk often and talk again. Share your values and beliefs and stay involved in their lives, guiding them as they make choices that can affect their future.

Today, more young people are having sexual intercourse at earlier ages than in the past (*14 and Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents* (Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2003)). And, while there are almost as many young people who have had sexual intercourse as those who have not (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States 2001," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, vol. 51, no. SS-4, June 28, 2002), many young people who consider themselves "virgins" still engage in sexual behaviors that can put them at risk for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs),

including HIV.

Whether or not you think your children are sexually active, it's important for them to know that certain behaviors—including oral sex—can put them at risk for STDs. It is also important for them to know how to prevent an unintended pregnancy, even if they won't actually use the information until later in life.

What Does It Mean to Be Abstinent?

Abstinence is a conscious decision to avoid certain activities or behaviors. When talking about sex, abstinence can have many different meanings. For some, it means not having any type of physical contact. For others, it means not having sexual intercourse (oral, vaginal or anal). Yet, it can also mean not having vaginal intercourse, but engaging in other sexual activities. Culture, religion, traditions, the media, peers, as well as family and personal values all play a role in how a person defines abstinence.

As parents and caregivers, it is very important to be clear about your personal and family values, and be able to communicate them to your children.

What Are the Benefits and Characteristics of a Comprehensive Sexuality Education Program?

While parents and caregivers are the main ones to teach their children about sexuality issues, school-based programs can supplement what young people learn at home.

Scientific evaluations of sexuality education, HIV prevention education and adolescent pregnancy prevention programs have consistently found that these programs can help delay intercourse, reduce the frequency of intercourse, reduce the number of sexual partners, and increase condom and contraceptive use among teens who are sexually active (D. Kirby, *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy* (Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2001)).

Research shows that effective sexuality education programs share a number of common characteristics. They:

- focus on reducing small numbers of sexual behaviors.
- are based on theories that have been effective in reducing other risky behaviors.
- give a clear message about abstaining from sexual activity as well as using contraception.
- provide basic, accurate information.
- include activities that address peer and social pressure related to sex.
- allow students to practice communication, negotiation and refusal skills.
- use a variety of teaching methods.
- are tailored to the age, culture and experience of students.
- last a sufficient length of time.
- are led by teachers who are genuinely interested in the topic and receive adequate training.

-Adapted from D. Kirby, *Effective Curricula*

and Their Common Characteristics (Santa Cruz, CA: ETR Associates, www.etr.org/recapp/programs/effectiveprograms.htm).

What Does Your Tween Know About Pregnancy, STDs and Contraception?

Because of the strong social pressures that start at this age, it is important for you to find out what your tween knows— about unintended pregnancy, STDs and contraception— regardless of whether or not you think they are sexually active. As a concerned parent or caregiver, you must make certain your children know about prevention *now*.

During the changes of puberty, your tweens are likely to be very curious about sex and need basic, accurate information. They need to know about pregnancy and STDs. They need to know why sexual intercourse— oral, vaginal and anal— is an adult behavior and why it is a good idea for young people to wait to have sex. They need to know that abstinence from sexual activity is the only 100 percent effective way to prevent an unintended pregnancy or STD, but that if and when they are sexually active, using condoms consistently and correctly can offer protection.

This may seem like a difficult task, but it will give you a chance to teach your children the values that you hope they will adopt in their lives. It is also the time to remind your children that they can come to you with questions about sexuality-related issues.

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**MAY IS NATIONAL
TEEN PREGNANCY
PREVENTION MONTH**

TIPS TO HELP YOU TALK WITH YOUR TWEENS

- Do not wait until your children ask questions.
- Know and practice the messages that you want to share.
- Seek “teachable moments”— daily opportunities that occur when you are with your children— that make it easy to share your messages and values.
- Let your children know that you are open to talking with them about these important issues.
- Listen.
- Try to understand your children’s point of view.
- Provide pamphlets, books and other age-appropriate, medically accurate materials.



- If you don’t know how to answer your children’s questions, offer to find the answers or look them up together.
- Find out what your children’s schools are teaching about these topics.
- Stay actively involved in your children’s lives.
- Help your children plan for their future.