

# Pointers for Parents: Raising Sexually Healthy Children

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**Parents Matter.** It is the privilege, right, and responsibility of parents to facilitate the development of healthy sexuality in their children. Parents should be a source of information and wisdom about sexual issues, support developmentally healthy sexuality, and most importantly, monitor and defend the safety of their children when possible and appropriate.

**Don't blame teens for being normal.** Our children live in a highly sexualized society where they are exposed to sexual language, images, and behaviors before they are developmentally prepared to handle them. Kids didn't "ask" for hormones at age 12, but they are stuck learning how to handle their changing bodies and urges in a society that shows them "yes" but tells them "not now."

**Don't discredit love.** Understand importance of romantic attachments in a teenager's life and the intensely strong feelings that they generate, even if your definition and perspective of love differs from your child's.

**Don't abstain from educating your own children.** If you don't educate them, someone else will. They learn from behaviors and attitudes modeled by other adults, from the media and popular culture, and certainly from peers. Stand up and let your own views be counted as part of their sex education.

**Talk about sex early and often.** They don't always hear you. They may not always believe you. They often don't remember, especially if they weren't ready to hear you. (But they are often listening when they are pretending not to be.)

**Right time, right place.** Provide accurate information in developmental context. Meet them where they are; a young child asking "what does sex mean?" may wonder what the teacher meant when she said "Line up by sex" for recess. Find out exactly what the question is, then try to give an honest answer that meets that need.

**Be real.** Dispel myths and rumors. Provide accurate information. Use simple language, but respect their intelligence and curiosity. Above all, avoid "talking down" to children and teens about sex.

**Teaching kids about sex doesn't mean parenting without values.** Acknowledging sexuality is not the same as condoning or giving permission to have sex. Help children understand that sexual thoughts and feelings are normal. This gives parents the opportunity to follow up with conversations about *how* (and from *what*) to be abstinent as well as how to regulate impulses and urges. It opens the door to continued conversation about how to be safe and responsible when teens begin to engage in intimate physical or sexual activities.

**Empower your children.** Let them know they deserve to feel honored in their relationships, to have their own space, to keep their friends, to include their family, and to feel good about who they are. Teach them to expect a give and take, but that in the end, a good relationship helps you to be more of who you already are and feel even better about it.

**Set positive expectations.** Let your children know they deserve to have great sex. Discussing what's good about sex will help them to have positive standards by which to judge sexual experiences. Help your kids know *why* sex is worth waiting for and give them some realistic guidance about how they will know when it might be worth moving forward.

**Use the media (the good, bad, and the ugly).** Use topics presented in daily media sources and popular teen culture as springboards for theoretical conversations about sex and relationships. Avoid proclamations and judgments even about fictional characters; your children will anticipate your reacting to them in the same way should they ever be in that situation.

**Live by example.** If you have a good relationship, let your children know it. Let them witness you and your partner having a disagreement and working it out; let them see you kiss and make up.

**You have two ears and one mouth.** Listen more than you talk. Be the sounding board that helps teens come to their own good decision about their sexual behaviors. Engaging kids in conversation about sexuality goes much farther toward developing independent decision making than lecturing about what they “should” and “shouldn’t” do.

**Ask, don’t tell.** Find out what your child is thinking when talking about relationships or sexual experiences. What does it mean to have a boyfriend or girlfriend at what age? Listen to what it means to them at that time. Their level of understanding and participation may actually be appropriate for their developmental level. Understand, don’t judge.

**Don’t ask too many questions** or you won’t get any information at all. Provide a respectful place for sharing what he or she is willing to share. Excitement of first love, feeling valued, wanted, desired by someone else in a very different, intensely intimate way.

**Keep it generic.** Avoid asking what exactly they did or didn’t do sexually; you don’t want them to demand details about your love life, either. Let your children know that you have been in difficult situations or know others who have been, and that you’re not afraid to discuss anything. Keeping things on a surface level gives permission to continue the discussion over a greater breadth (and possibly depth) of topics and allows you to communicate more honestly about sex in ways that may very well be helpful in the future.

**Adolescence is for practice.** Teen years are for learning. What is the difference between a crush and real love? Between a “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” and a friend who is a boy or a girl? What belongs on social media and what doesn’t? Without a few battle scars, how will we know a good relationship when we see it? On the other hand, major mistakes that change our lives (like disease or unintended pregnancy) are best avoided.

**Things that are hard are not without value.** Help your teen learn from his or her mistakes. The goal is to learn to develop and maintain healthy relationship skills. Protecting your children from every trauma may not bring the message home as well as the lessons learned from experiencing a broken heart themselves.

**Beware of the “D” word.** Children fear *disappointing* their parents’ more than just about anything else in the world. While you should let children know when their behavior is dangerous or wrong, be very clear that there is nothing they could ever do that would make you stop loving them. Reassure them that after your blood pressure comes down, you still want what’s best for them and you will see they find help when they need it. Avoid getting into situations where their fear of your disappointment or anger keeps them from coming to you when they need you the most.

**Be clear that safety is non-negotiable.** Think about your bottom-line priorities for your children. Chances are, nothing matters to you more than their safety. Be very clear, and repeat often, that nothing matters more than knowing they are going to be okay. Establish a code word they can use to get your attention and help when they need to get out of a potentially dangerous or uncomfortable situation. Set a standard for protecting themselves from disease and unwanted pregnancy regardless of whether you agree with their decision making about sex. Make sure that they know they can come to you for help if something goes wrong.

**Find a surrogate.** Talking about sex is difficult. When necessary, identify and encourage them to ask for help from other trusted adults; it doesn’t always have to be you.

**Build your own toolkit.** Create a list of web resources about sexuality that you believe offer sound information and advice. Consider keeping books at home which support your values about sexuality while providing accurate information. Find resources in your community such as clinics, hotlines, therapeutic specialists, and support groups in case you or your children need more help.