

# Communication

In this section we will discuss the following:

Tips on how to start a conversation with your child about sex

Effective communication with your child or teenager

Ways to approach the conversation

The best time and place to talk to your child

The different approaches to communication

**talk  
to me**

**TALK  
TO ME**

talk  
to me

**talk  
to  
me**

## Starting - Opening up a conversation

Getting off to a good start is half the battle with a teenager. You know your child. You know the times when both of you are more likely to be relaxed together and when you could gently raise a sensitive topic.

Maybe driving them home from shopping, or maybe dropping them off to a friend. Find a time when you're unlikely to be interrupted and where you both feel reasonably comfortable. Sometimes it may not be a matter of setting up a scene where conversation is possible as much as spotting a good moment and taking advantage of it.

Building towards a talk about sex means you don't necessarily dive in at the deep end. It's often a good idea to start a conversation with something that's important in their life. It's important to start with a comment that sounds positive, not critical.



- What's happening that's important lately?
- What have they been doing that has impressed you lately?
- The way they reacted to a problem in their friend's life; or perhaps the way they were able to deal with a problem at school.

“ At home it was more about the feelings you feel towards someone and how your emotions develop. Whereas in school it was more diagrams and that sort of thing. ”

- Tom aged 18

Everyday events can provide an easy opening to the topic of sexuality. What about that story on TV? What did they make of all the commotion about that young girl who got so upset about being pressured by her boyfriend? Or what about a family relative who has just announced they're expecting a child.

### How did that happen?

Don't be afraid to talk about your own sense of confusion when you were a child and heard about these things. It may help a teenager to know that you were a teenager once. You also struggled with trying to be cool, even though inside you were terrified. Showing that you're human makes them feel more at ease and gets them interested in learning how you coped, possibly with only minimal support.



You don't have to have the perfect sex education to be effective in talking to your child about it. Life is a learning process. Valuable lessons can be learnt from both good and bad experiences - the important thing is to pass on that knowledge to your child.

So you've set the scene, you've taken the plunge and you've established in their mind that sex is important and that it wasn't always an easy issue for you. **What next?**

## Building Start as you mean to continue

Your first conversations with your children about sex and sexual matters will set the tone for future discussions.

Children, whatever their age, will ask questions about relationships and sex. These questions can be answered in many different ways - the important thing is to always be honest and open with your child. Ideally you should start talking to your children about sexuality from an early age when they begin to ask questions. But don't worry if you haven't talked to them about sex since they were young, you can start now.



Sex education is not just about penises and vaginas (the biology of male and females); it is also about relationships, emotions and feelings. Talking and listening to your child will encourage them to understand sex and relationships and to develop the skills and attitudes they need to feel happy and supported in who they are.

Young people need to feel that you trust them and value their opinions. If you do not listen to them, you cannot expect them to listen to you.

“ It's only basic that you should be able to talk to your parents above anyone else about whatever you want ”

- Joan aged 18

## Listening and respect

### Tips for effective communication



- Be honest and open at all times. But you don't have to answer more than your child asks.
- If you don't know the answer to a question say so. When you don't know the answer try to find out after the discussion. Make sure you tell your child what you find out.
- Don't try to hide shock or embarrassment. Both parents and children may be shocked or embarrassed by some issues raised during a discussion about sex. The important thing is to remain open about your feelings.
- Tell them you are always happy to answer their questions. Mention this again to them sometime after the conversation.
- Be sure to ask questions as much as you are asked.
- Listening is a key part of communication. This way you can find out what your child knows and correct anything that they have misunderstood.
- If your child asks an awkward question in public, don't criticise them. Just say that it's an interesting question, and one that you should discuss when you get home. Be sure to follow up on it when you return home.
- Have books or leaflets for your child to read, or for you to look at together.

## Relationships

### Creating an atmosphere of communication

Communicating about sex and relationships will give your child the knowledge and tools to make judgements for him or herself. Talking to children about these things is not just about having one conversation that will explain everything – it is about creating an atmosphere where your child can approach you about any matters that they are curious about or that are worrying them.

Research has shown that children who have discussed relationships with their parents from a young age are more likely to wait until they are older before having sex.

## Responding

### How should you answer questions?

Children begin asking questions from an early age: "Where did I come from?," "How are babies born?" "Why are boys and girls different?" As your child grows, their questions will become more specific.

### Remember when answering questions:

- Don't assume anything - be sure to ask questions as to what they already know before answering.
- The question your child asks may not always be the one that is really on their mind. Sometimes they will test the water with a similar or related question. Listen carefully to all questions your child asks.
- The way you answer a question will depend on your child's age and stage of development - you know your child best; your answer should be suited to their needs and level of development.



## Conclusion



- Children want to learn about sex and relationships from their parents.
- Parents are the first and primary teacher of their child.
- If you don't talk about sex with your children, you're giving out the wrong messages about it!
- Talking to children about sex DOES NOT MEAN that you are encouraging them to have sex.
- Young people who discuss sex and relationships with their parents are more likely to delay when they first have sex and they are more likely to use contraception when they choose to have sex.

- Don't lecture, listen.
- Where possible both parents need to be involved.
- Be honest and open at all times.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, find out from another source and tell your child at a future time.

