

TALKING TO YOUR TEEN ABOUT SEXUALITY



PARENT PACKAGE

13 YEARS OF AGE AND OLDER



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WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

The Parent's Role

Parents want to provide the guidance and knowledge their children need to become responsible and happy adults. But they can also sometimes be afraid of talking about sexuality with their children because:

- they believe their child is too young/not ready
- they don't know how to talk to their child about the subject
- they have a lack of understanding of the stages of sexual development
- they are uncomfortable talking about reproductive body parts and functions
- the topic of sex and sexuality was not discussed by their own parents when they were growing up
- they worry talking about sexuality and reproduction will encourage experimentation
- they are unsure what children need to know and when they need to know it

As parents, you are already teaching your teens many things about sexuality and have been since the day they were born. They learn from:

- the way they are touched by others
- the way their bodies feel to them
- what your family believes is okay and not okay to do
- the words that family members use (and don't use) to refer to parts of the body
- watching the relationships around them
- observing male/female roles
- watching television
- listening to music
- talking with their friends

The Difference between Sex and Sexuality

Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. Examples of sex categories are "male" and "female". The term "sex" is also often used to mean "sexual activity," but for the context of a discussion about sexuality and sexual health, the above definition is correct.

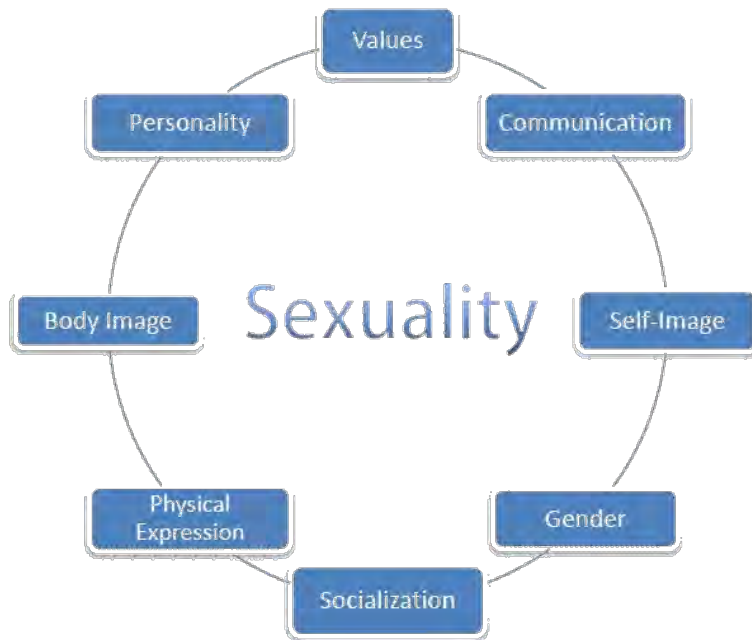
It is common to hear both the terms "sex" and "gender". These terms can cause some confusion as they are closely related but have different meanings.

Gender refers to the roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Examples of gender categories are "masculine" and "feminine."

Sexuality is not just sexual intercourse or sexual activity. It also has to do with:

- being female or male, and how females and males are alike and different in the way they look and act
- how we view our bodies and our relationships with each other
- how we grow and change over the years
- who we are as women and men (girls and boys)
- intimacy
- how we reproduce

Sexuality is an important part of being human and healthy sexuality is an important part of a person's overall health and well-being.



The sexuality wheel shows how different ideas and experiences influence the meaning of sexuality. Sexuality is much more than intercourse. Since we all interpret and experience sexuality differently, parents have a chance to provide support to their children in developing an understanding of sexuality that reflects personal experiences and family values. The way people understand sexual health will affect the way they learn and talk about sexual health. By providing a variety of opportunities, we can promote respect and belonging while appreciating different perspectives.

Some Facts about Sexual Health Education

- In 2005, 43% of Canadian teens aged 15–19 said they'd had sexual intercourse at least once.
- Parents have reported that school-based sexual health education makes it easier for them to engage in conversations with their children as it creates natural opportunities for communication to occur and information to be shared within the home.
- Almost half of Canadian teens say they view their parents as role models and valuable sources of information.
- Most parents would like to play a role within their child's sexual health education. Some reported their motivation to do so came from a desire to provide information to their children that they wish they had received from their own parents.
- Research indicates that parent-child communication about sexuality can have a positive influence on teen sexual behaviours.
- Evaluations of comprehensive sexual health education programs (full information at appropriate ages) do not increase sexual behaviour but instead, some programs delay or decrease sexual behaviours or increase condom or contraceptive use.
- Many parents and guardians support comprehensive school-based sexual health programs, as they see schools as knowledgeable and competent sources of information for their children.
- Some youth report that they don't trust that the internet is providing them with accurate information, but will use it to verify what they have already been told by their parents, teachers or peers

Opportunities for Parents

The benefit of parents speaking to their child about sexuality is that they can:

- communicate their own values about sexuality
- provide correct information
- better understand their child's perspective
- answer questions honestly and using words they can understand
- start the conversation
- tailor the information they share based on their understanding of their teenager's stage of development, life experience, personality and knowledge level
- help their child make good decisions and then stand by them

FAMILY BELIEFS

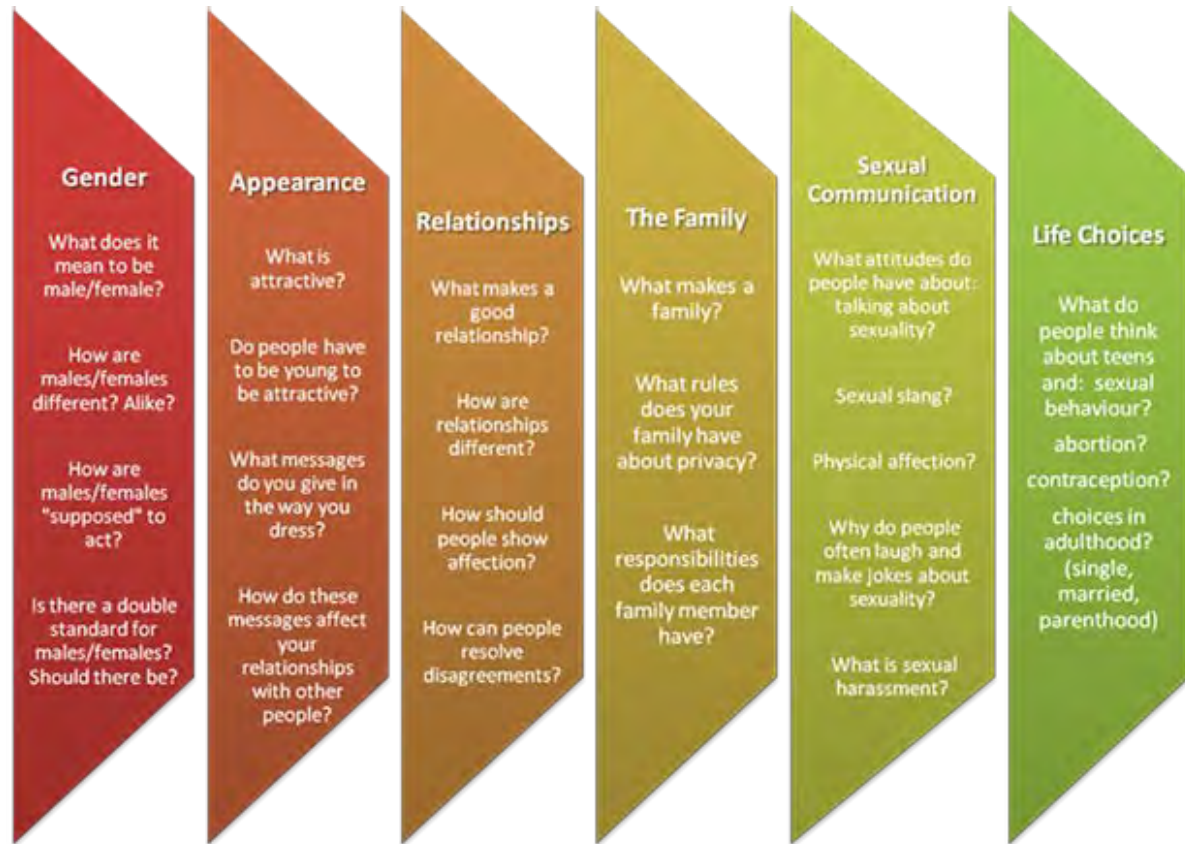
As a parent, you hope that your child will always make good choices that are based on the values that your family shares. An important part of discussing sexuality with your children is sharing with them what you believe. Ask yourself:

- Does your child know what you believe?
- Have you discussed your values about sexuality as a family?

The following chart may provide you with some things to think and talk about as a family.

When you have a family discussion, remember to:

- choose a quiet time when nobody is feeling rushed
- treat each other with respect
- really listen to each family member
- be honest
- share your reasons for the things you believe



YOUR TEEN'S DEVELOPMENT AND WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW

General Information for 13 Years of Age and Older

The period of adolescence is marked not only by physical changes, but also by important behavioural changes. A new significance is attached to sexual expression and awakening.

Aim to be an askable parent who will be there when your teenager needs you. At this age they still have a million questions in their minds that they won't ask aloud. Use teachable moments when they present themselves. When you are watching TV together or listening to songs with sexual lyrics, discuss these topics as they arise. Car rides present great opportunities to talk. Leave literature around. Some of the below changes may have already started to take place.

Development in Adolescence

The body continues to change related to puberty. On average, boys develop about two years later than girls. The following is a list of changes your child may have already gone through or will experience during their early teen years.

Physical

Both Males and Females

- Growth continues
- Weight gain
- Hair growth in pubic area, on legs and under arms continues to get longer and thicker throughout puberty

- Acne or pimples on the face, upper back and/or chest due to hormones
- Body odour and the need to wear antiperspirant/deodorant begins

Females

- Breasts continue or begin to grow
- Soreness under the nipples
- Begin to menstruate (usually 2–2½ years after breasts begin to grow)
- Weight gain
- White, mucous-like discharge from the vagina

Males

- Shoulders grow wider
- Further muscle development
- Voice cracks and becomes deeper
- Potential swelling under the nipples (this growth usually goes away by the end of puberty)
- Penis begins to lengthen and widen
- Testes grow larger
- Capable of erections and ejaculation, sometimes while sleeping
- Sperm production
- Facial hair begins to grow

Emotional

- May feel confused, have strong emotions and feel anxious about their changing body
- May become easily upset/sensitive or lose temper more than usual
- Added concern about what others think of them
- Changes in relationships
- Peer acceptance continues to be very important
- Conformity to peer group is less important (from 15 to 19 years)
- Relationship with parents becomes more of an adult exchange

Sexual

- A new desire for sexual experiences and feelings that accompany the sex drive, which are initiated by body hormones
- Same-sex friendships become very important
- Peer group is very influential (used as a source of comparison for behaviour, dress and overall taste)
- Dating relationships are typically short-term, more social and experimental
- Greater interest in sexuality—experience sexual fantasies as a way of preparing for and understanding their sexual roles
- Starts to become interested in or develops romantic relationships
- May have attraction or sexual experience with someone of the same sex (not necessarily an indication of a sexual orientation)
- May masturbate
- As they age, dating relationships have a deeper involvement, with genuine concern for their partner
- Increased physical desire for sexual play and intimacy

Developmental

- Strong need and desire to assert independence; may rebel against parents
- Begin to think more abstractly
- May appear unhappy with expectations from parents, but are privately reassured that their parents care enough to put expectations on them
- Tend to experiment, to try out different roles and search for self
- Start to define personal values, using family, peer and societal values as a guide
- Has a need for a supportive environment and for parents to be understanding
- An improved ability to think abstractly, to consider possible solutions to a problem and to predict cause-and-effect relationships (15–19 years)
- Future plans become important and start to be put in place (15–19 years)

What They Need to Know

- the names for genitals: penis, testicles, scrotum, anus, vulva, labia, vagina, clitoris, uterus and ovaries
- more detailed information menstrual periods and nocturnal emissions, and that they are clean and healthy processes
- how to question and critique the distorted, popular, commercialized views of the supposedly perfect body
- how sexuality is exaggerated in pornography and how its performers are exploited
- that a teenager does not have to be sexually active
- information about the correct use of contraceptives, as well as their potential failure
- information about emergency contraception
- detailed information about pregnancy
- detailed information about STIs and safer sex
- knowledge about the connection between alcohol, drugs and adolescent decision-making, including sexual activity
- the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships
- negotiation skills, refusal skills and relationship skills (e.g., how to end a relationship)
- information about what to expect when they visit a doctor

TIPS FOR DISCUSSING SEXUALITY WITH YOUR TEEN

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- ✓ Remember that teenagers still view their family members and parents as their primary role models.
 - ✓ Start having open conversations as early as possible to help open the lines of communication.
 - ✓ Answer questions when your teen asks them—don't put them off.
 - ✓ Listen carefully to the question to make sure you understand what they are asking.
 - ✓ Offer reassurance that people mature at different rates.
 - ✓ Use teachable moments to open discussion. Discuss and help interpret issues as they arise in TV shows, ads, music, the news and in the community. Help confirm what is meaningful, realistic and important to your sense of values.
 - ✓ Encourage your teen to express their thoughts and views. An open exchange of ideas can help clarify the values you each hold.
 - ✓ Help your teen learn from both good and bad experiences.
 - ✓ Check out what they already know. There are lots of opportunities for this age group to hear myths and truths on their own. Ask what they can tell you about a particular sexual topic. This encourages communication and can give you the opportunity to correct any misinformation that they may have.
 - ✓ Play the what-if game. Ask them a situational question (e.g., "What if you got pregnant/got someone pregnant?", "What if your friends asked you to do something you weren't comfortable with?") Do not judge their response, but do discuss the possible consequences.
- ✓ Along with facts, talk about feelings, relationships and how other people are affected by them.
 - ✓ Be sure there are resources in your home where your children can get correct information. If they don't come to you, they can use an age-appropriate book to get the answers they're looking for.

Communicate your values honestly—and expect to have them challenged. Teenagers want to be independent and have their own identities. Parents want that, too, but they must continue to say what they believe and model it in their own lives.

Opening the Lines of Communication

Providing an atmosphere where open, honest and two-way communication can take place is a major way parents can assist their children in avoiding problems with drugs, alcohol, sexual decisions and peer relationships.

Remember that your children care about what you say and do, even though it may not seem like it at times. To open and maintain the lines of communication between you and your teen, we suggest the following:

- Try not to talk down to your teen. This may be difficult, but they are old enough to have a mature conversation. Respect their views and validate their feelings.
- Demonstrate responsible, health-conscious decisions with your own use of alcohol and other drugs.
- Avoid acting as if you already know everything. Be an active learner yourself.
- Stay involved in their lives to help your teen feel connected to you. Do a variety of activities with them.
- Speak to them as a mature person. Use correct terms to show that you respect their age and knowledge.
- Recognize you can't control all of your teen's actions. Give assurance that there may be times you do not approve of their actions but you will not abandon them and will always love them unconditionally. Promote responsibility for their own actions.

FINDING RESOURCES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

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This information is intended to assist you in finding agencies or organizations within your community that can help support you in raising a sexually healthy child. There are many different resources available, but it is important to choose the ones that follow your family's beliefs and values.

Things to Think About

You may want to ask some questions to determine if an agency integrates a philosophy that provides a high quality of service and education that is comprehensive, appropriate for the age of your child, sensitive to your cultural beliefs and values and respectful of individual choices and rights.

- What is the organization's philosophy and mission?
- What types of services does it offer?
- What type of training do the employees or volunteers receive?
- How is it funded and who is it accountable to?

Agencies that Support Sexual Health and Education

- **Community/Public Health Centres** have public health nurses who are active within their communities and schools. They provide services and information, counseling and referral regarding birth control, STIs, pregnancy options, and pregnancy and parenting. Some health centres may also have family planning and STI clinics. A listing of community/public health centres and services provided by Alberta Health Services can be obtained by calling Health Link at 811 or online at www.albertahealthservices.ca
- Your local schools provide sexual health teaching based on Alberta Education's curriculum. The curriculum can be accessed through education.alberta.ca.
- Your local community health centre may have a **community services directory** (often available through the public library), which will list community organizations and health and social agencies.
- Your community may also have **Family and Community Support Service (FCSS)** that may be able to direct you to other local agencies/resources, or help set up local partnerships that focus on prevention and enhance social and health well-being.

Online Resources

Teaching Sexual Health

www.teachingsexualhealth.ca

A website developed by Alberta educators and health professionals. Parents are provided with resources, information and links that supplement their understanding and knowledge of healthy sexuality.

Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights

<http://www.sexualhealthandrights.ca/>

Articles about talking with your child/teen about sex, links to resources and guidelines for finding credible websites.

PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

www.pflag.ca

Information, resources and support for parents of lesbians and gays.

Public Health Agency of Canada

Questions and Answers: Sexual Orientation in Schools

<http://library.catie.ca/pdf/ATI-20000s/26288E.pdf>

Public Health Agency of Canada

Questions and Answers: Gender Identity in Schools

<http://library.catie.ca/pdf/ATI-20000s/26289E.pdf>

Sexuality and U

www.sexualityandu.ca

Provides information about puberty, talking about sex with your child, STIs and contraception.

