

# Talking to your children about relationships and sex



**Please contact us on 0845 090 8044 for other leaflet formats e.g. large print, audio, another language or through discussion.**

## Introduction

Talking to your children about relationships and sex can be difficult for any parent, especially at the start.

Not talking about it can seem the easier option: 'My child's not old enough yet', 'I want to protect her from all of that', 'It's my wife's job', 'He gets all the information he needs from school', 'I don't know where to start' or 'It's embarrassing!'

However, your child needs to learn about this subject sooner or later and as their parent or carer, you are the person best placed to give them the information and advice that they want and need.

In clear, simple language, this booklet has been produced as a general guide for parents and carers who would like information on talking with their children about relationships and sex.

It has not been written with the intention of telling parents what they should or shouldn't do, but is packed with practical information which they may find useful when talking to their children on this subject.

## Why do I need to talk to my child about this?

*86% of parents think that there would be fewer teenage pregnancies if more parents talked to their teenagers about relationships and sex. - Family Lives*

All children need to learn about relationships and sex somehow. If they don't learn about this from you, they are more likely to turn to their friends and the media. Some of this information may be inaccurate, misleading and confusing. You can help them to sort out the fact from the fiction. If you don't talk to your child, how do you know what sorts of ideas and information they are getting?

Contrary to popular belief, most children, both boys and girls, would like their parent or carer to talk to them about relationships and sex. Children also want both their mothers and fathers to talk to them on this subject. Children who talk to their parents about these issues are more likely to be responsible in their relationships and wait longer to have sex for the first time. They are also more likely to use contraception.

Talking to your child will help them grow up feeling good about themselves, sex, sexuality and relationships. Not talking, on the other hand, will send a strong message that sex is scary, dirty, embarrassing and shouldn't be talked about.

Young people say that they want to talk about relationships, responsibilities and values and not just the biology. By discussing the subject with your children, you can also pass on values and beliefs that are important to you and your family, which will help them to form their own.

All children are different. Some teenagers prefer reading information, whilst others find it easier to talk things through. Most will need more than one conversation. Being open and available when needed is extremely important.

*"And don't forget young people need to know that, when they are ready, everyone engaged in consenting sexual activity has a right to fun, enjoyment and fulfilment - in other words, sexual pleasure."* - Taken from 'Pleasure' - The Centre for HIV and Sexual Health, NHS Sheffield (2009)

## At what age should I talk to my child about this?

It's never too early to start a conversation on this subject. Children start learning about relationships and sex from an early age and their learning continues throughout childhood and into adulthood.

Very young children tend to ask questions such as 'Where do babies come from?' or 'How are babies born?' and 'Why hasn't so and so got a daddy?' As they grow older this natural curiosity continues as they learn about what their bodies can and can't do and find out how things work and are made. Helping young children to understand their bodies, their feelings and the feelings of others are essential ingredients for open discussions throughout their childhood.

Once you get the conversations going you just need to continue them as they get older. Teenagers in particular find it more difficult to ask questions and are less likely to admit that they don't know. They want to know more about sexual intercourse, contraception, sexually transmitted infections and relationships.

The thing to remember is that the more they understand, the more likely they are to make the right choices when the time comes.

## Talking about this subject can be difficult. How can I make it easier?

Talking about sex may not be the easiest of topics especially at the beginning, but these are areas that young people want and need to talk about. All parents find it difficult but it's worth it, if it helps to keep their children safe.

### The following tips should make things easier:

- Start early, building on information as your child gets older.
- Use everyday situations to start conversations. These could be things that arise within your family or community - such as marriages, partnerships, pregnancy, separation and divorce - or they could be things that happen in TV dramas, soap operas or the news.
- Talking about the agony aunt or problem pages in teenager magazines can also be a useful way of exploring attitudes and values.
- Try talking when you're involved in another activity e.g. driving or unpacking the shopping, washing up. This is less threatening, less embarrassing and makes discussions part of normal life.
- Be a good role model - if they see that you are considerate, thoughtful and responsible, they will learn the value of behaving that way too.
- If you're put on the spot don't panic! Try to give a simple, honest answer. You can always bring the discussion up later when you've had more time to think about it.
- Find out what your child knows already, this will help you fill in any gaps, correct misunderstandings and to give answers that they can understand.
- If you don't know the answer to a question just say so and then find out, perhaps together, by going to the library, a school nurse or by visiting relevant websites (see Useful Contacts).
- Children need to know the proper words for sexual body parts such as vagina, vulva, penis and testicles and also the words used for sexual relationships and activity. You and your family might use different words at home that you are more comfortable with. However, remember GPs, nurses, teachers other professionals and adults will use the proper words and children need to understand these too.

- Accept that discussions will be most difficult with teenage children- keep trying, even if it doesn't go well at first at least you will have broken the ice. Remind them that you are always there for them if they need you.
- Make sure you choose a time to start the conversation when you are both relaxed and getting on OK, not during an argument or when either of you are feeling annoyed about something.
- Try not to lecture or preach. Older children resist being told what to do and what not to do. Instead have open discussions, listening carefully to what your child has to say. It will help to try to understand things from their point of view - you may like to reassure your child by sharing experiences and feelings from your own childhood.
- Avoid using scare tactics. These rarely work and with older children and may even have the opposite effect to that intended.
- Ask them what their friends have to say on the subject. It's a way of talking about their feelings and fears directly.
- Ask other parents and carers about how they answer difficult questions. You are not going through this alone.
- With teenagers, work out together, in advance, how they can cope in situations where they feel under pressure.

## Relationships and sex education in schools

All maintained schools must teach some parts of sex education i.e. the biological aspects of puberty, reproduction and the spread of viruses. These topics are statutory parts of the National Curriculum Science which must be taught to all pupils of primary and secondary age.

There is also a separate requirement for secondary schools to teach about HIV and AIDS and sexually transmitted infections.

The broader subject of sex and relationships education (SRE or RSE) is currently not compulsory but schools can teach this during PSHE education within the National Curriculum. All maintained schools must have an RSE (SRE) policy that explains what they will cover outside the science curriculum and how it is taught.

It may be a good idea to find out what relationships and sex education is being taught in school so you can discuss what you child thought of the lessons. Contact your child's school for more information.

Some parents worry that sex education at school encourages young people to have sex early. There is no evidence that this is the case and there is plenty of evidence that relationships and sex education helps young people be more aware of the risks and how to make safe choices.

It is important to remember that although schools teach the basic facts on the subject, they can't give your child the one-to-one attention that you can. As a parent or carer, you can make sure that your child receives information that they need at a time that is right for them.

*"Relationships and Sex Education is one thing from school you take with you forever". -*  
Quote from a father published in 'Customer Voice Research' (2009) DCSF Research Report (DCSF - RR175)

## Teaching your child that it's OK to wait!

Once your child is in secondary school, they'll be going through puberty and picking up misinformation and pressures from other kids. Although they might think everyone is 'doing it', most teenagers don't have sex until they are at least 16 and those that do are more likely to regret it and are at greater risk of pregnancy and STIs (sexually transmitted infections).

All the evidence suggests that talking openly to your teenager makes them feel less pressure to have sex and that means they are more likely to wait. Talking openly gives them the confidence to approach the subject with their boyfriends or girlfriends and practice safer sex when the time comes.

However, if you think your son or daughter is already sexually active, don't ignore it, talk to them.

## But I don't know enough about relationships and sex myself!

This doesn't matter. You don't need to be an expert to be able to communicate well on the subject. What is more important is that you are open, relaxed and comfortable when you talk with your child.

Often children just want your support, reassurance and guidance. If you however feel you want to find out more about this subject, then refer to the 'Useful Contacts' section towards the end of this booklet.

### Here are some basic facts to get you started:

- Condoms and femidoms are the only methods of contraception that provide effective protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV / AIDS. Even if a girl is on the pill it's important to use condoms as well, as the pill will only prevent pregnancy. By talking about STIs and condoms you can help your teenagers understand the risks and protect themselves.
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are passed on through sexual contact. Most are easily treated with a course of antibiotics if detected early. If STIs are left or are undetected they can lead to serious complications. Some STIs have no symptoms, so if a person thinks they have been in contact with someone with an STI, getting tested is the best option.
- The age of sexual consent for all sexualities is 16 (Sexual Offences Act 2003).
- Young people under 16, including those under 13, have a right to receive confidential sexual health advice from a health professional and can legally consent to treatment providing they are competent to understand the choices of treatment and their consequences.

## What if my son or daughter is gay, lesbian or bi-sexual?

It is important to keep an open mind. Your child may be confused about their sexuality or feelings. They may know or think that they are bi-sexual, lesbian or gay. You may feel shocked, upset or even angry - but they deserve your respect and support, whatever your opinion about their sexuality.

It is also important to remember that if your son or daughter is growing up gay, lesbian or bi-sexual, they still need good sexual health advice.

Homophobic bullying is very common so your teenager may need help and support and again there are many sources of help available. If you suspect your teenager is encountering such problems because of their sexual orientation, encourage them to ask for help by visiting **[www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk)** or calling **08000 50 20 20**.

## Alcohol, drugs and sex

*"When asked why they had sex for the first time, 20% of men and 13% of women aged 15-19 said alcohol was the main reason" - Family Lives*

Unprotected and early sex often happens for the first time when a young person is under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. The number of teenagers trying drink and drugs in their early teens is growing, often influenced by peer pressure and the media. Most who have sex under the influence admit that they regret what happened.

Being under the influence of drink and/or drugs can lead to unplanned and unprotected sex. By having an honest and open discussion with your teenager about this, you can make them aware of the potential risks involved in such activity and help them to protect themselves.



# Useful Contacts and Websites

## **Family Lives**

For advice on all parenting issues.

Helpline: 0808 800 2222

[www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk)

## **Family Planning Association**

National sexual health charity giving information on contraception and sexually transmitted infections. They also have various books for parents.

[www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk) Tel. 0845 122 8690

## **Brook**

Provides free and confidential sexual health advice to young people.

Helpline: 0808 802 1234

[www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

## **Warwickshire Respect Yourself Campaign**

A website developed by young people for young people featuring relationships and sexual health information and details of all local contraceptive and sexual health services.

[www.respectyourself.info](http://www.respectyourself.info)

**Respect Yourself** also has a new smartphone application for young people to look up information on the move. Visit Respect Yourself to download it. Follow the campaign at: [www.warwickshire.gov.uk/ryc](http://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/ryc)

## **Besavvy**

Website in partnership between Coventry City Council, NHS Coventry and Coventry University.

Now includes a parents' computer game version of advice programme "What Should We tell The Children about Relationships and Sex?"

[www.besavvy.org.uk](http://www.besavvy.org.uk)

## **Warwickshire's Chlamydia Screening Programme**

Telephone: 02476 378 617 (for

Information and appointments)

[www.freetest.me.uk](http://www.freetest.me.uk) (for free postal test kits)

## **Fatherhood Institute**

National information centre on fatherhood.

[www.fatherhoodinstitute.org](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org)

## **FFLAG**

National organisation providing support to parents and friends of gay, lesbian and bisexual sons and daughters.

[www.fflag.org.uk](http://www.fflag.org.uk)

Helpline: 0845 652 0311

## **Talk to Frank**

Government's national confidential drugs helpline and website.

Helpline: 0800 77 66 00

[www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

## **Addaction**

A national drugs and alcohol treatment charity.

Telephone: 020 7251 5860 (general information only)

[www.addaction.org.uk](http://www.addaction.org.uk)

Telephone: 01926 885 000 (Addaction Warwickshire)

## **Talk with your Kids**

An american organisation but with some useful information.

[www.talkwithkids.org](http://www.talkwithkids.org)

## Further Reading

### 1. "Speakeasy: talking with your children about growing up".

**fpa (2009) - available from [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)**

This workbook helps you to develop your skills and build up your knowledge and confidence. It includes stories from other parents, typical questions your child may ask and suggestions on how you can answer appropriately for their age.

### 2. "Flight of the Stork: What children think (and when) about sex and family building".

**Anne Bernstein (revised edition 1994)**

This American book examines how children think differently from adults concerning sex and birth. Interviews take us deep into the minds of children aged three to 12 years old. The interviews demonstrate each child's level of mental development and also show how a child's thinking changes with age.

Available through Amazon.com and other online bookstores.

The Family Information Service can provide you with a list of other books regarding this subject if you require them. Our contact details are on the back cover.

## Courses

### What should we tell the children... about relationships and sex?

A 4-week programme for parents, run by trained facilitators, covering a wide range of issues.

Visit **[www.warwickshire.gov.uk/parentingprogrammes](http://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/parentingprogrammes)** or telephone **01926 742219** if you would like to find out details of courses in your local area.

## Other titles in this series include:

**Choosing Childcare and Early Education**

**Dealing with Bullying - A Parents' Guide**

**Dealing with Discrimination**

**Dealing with Separation and Divorce**

**Encouraging Good Behaviour**

**Life with a Teenager**

**Moving on to Secondary School**

**Surfing Safely - Your Family's Guide to Internet Safety**

**Tackling Homework and Revision**

**Talking to your Child about Alcohol & Drugs**

**Why Dads Matter**

**Your Child's Learning - Getting Involved**



# Contacting the Family Information Service

If you are looking for any further information or advice for your family the Family Information Service can help you. We offer a free and impartial information and signposting service for parents and carers of children and young people on a range of topics such as; childcare, benefits, health, leisure disability support and much more.

If you don't know who to ask, ask the Family Information Service!

## Phone us:

**0845 090 8044 or 01926 742274**

## Email us:

**[fis@warwickshire.gov.uk](mailto:fis@warwickshire.gov.uk)**

## Visit our website:

**[www.warwickshire.gov.uk/fis](http://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/fis)**



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Information Service**

