



BRIGHT FUTURES HANDOUT ► PARENT

11 THROUGH 14 YEAR VISITS

Here are some suggestions from Bright Futures experts that may be of value to your family.

✓ HOW YOUR FAMILY IS DOING

- Encourage your child to be part of family decisions. Give your child the chance to make more of her own decisions as she grows older.
- Encourage your child to think through problems with your support.
- Help your child find activities she is really interested in, besides schoolwork.
- Help your child find and try activities that help others.
- Help your child deal with conflict.
- Help your child figure out nonviolent ways to handle anger or fear.
- If you are worried about your living or food situation, talk with us. Community agencies and programs such as SNAP can also provide information and assistance.

✓ YOUR GROWING AND CHANGING CHILD

- Help your child get to the dentist twice a year.
- Give your child a fluoride supplement if the dentist recommends it.
- Encourage your child to brush her teeth twice a day and floss once a day.
- Praise your child when she does something well, not just when she looks good.
- Support a healthy body weight and help your child be a healthy eater.
 - Provide healthy foods.
 - Eat together as a family.
 - Be a role model.
- Help your child get enough calcium with low-fat or fat-free milk, low-fat yogurt, and cheese.
- Encourage your child to get at least 1 hour of physical activity every day. Make sure she uses helmets and other safety gear.
- Consider making a family media use plan. Make rules for media use and balance your child's time for physical activities and other activities.
- Check in with your child's teacher about grades. Attend back-to-school events, parent-teacher conferences, and other school activities if possible.
- Talk with your child as she takes over responsibility for schoolwork.
- Help your child with organizing time, if she needs it.
- Encourage daily reading.

✓ YOUR CHILD'S FEELINGS

- Find ways to spend time with your child.
- If you are concerned that your child is sad, depressed, nervous, irritable, hopeless, or angry, let us know.
- Talk with your child about how his body is changing during puberty.
- If you have questions about your child's sexual development, you can always talk with us.

✓ HEALTHY BEHAVIOR CHOICES

- Help your child find fun, safe things to do.
- Make sure your child knows how you feel about alcohol and drug use.
- Know your child's friends and their parents. Be aware of where your child is and what he is doing at all times.
- Lock your liquor in a cabinet.
- Store prescription medications in a locked cabinet.
- Talk with your child about relationships, sex, and values.
- If you are uncomfortable talking about puberty or sexual pressures with your child, please ask us or others you trust for reliable information that can help.
- Use clear and consistent rules and discipline with your child.
- Be a role model.

Helpful Resource: Family Media Use Plan: www.healthychildren.org/MediaUsePlan

11 THROUGH 14 YEAR VISITS—PARENT

✓ SAFETY

- Make sure everyone always wears a lap and shoulder seat belt in the car.
- Provide a properly fitting helmet and safety gear for biking, skating, in-line skating, skiing, snowmobiling, and horseback riding.
- Use a hat, sun protection clothing, and sunscreen with SPF of 15 or higher on her exposed skin. Limit time outside when the sun is strongest (11:00 am–3:00 pm).
- Don't allow your child to ride ATVs.
- Make sure your child knows how to get help if she feels unsafe.
- If it is necessary to keep a gun in your home, store it unloaded and locked with the ammunition locked separately from the gun.

Consistent with *Bright Futures: Guidelines for Health Supervision of Infants, Children, and Adolescents, 4th Edition*

For more information, go to <https://brightfutures.aap.org>.



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Tips for Parents of Adolescents

Adolescence is the time between childhood and adulthood when your daughter or son will go through many physical and emotional changes. It begins with puberty which, for girls, usually starts between 8 and 13 years of age, and for boys, between 10 to 14 years of age.

Though these years can be difficult, it can also be a rewarding time watching your teen make the transition into an independent, caring, and responsible adult.

The American Academy of Pediatrics offers the following tips to help you and your teen navigate adolescence. *Teen* will be the term used in this publication when referring to adolescent, teenager, preteen, and tween.

1. **Spend family time with your teen.** Although many teens may seem more interested in friends, this does not mean they are not interested in family.
2. **Spend time alone with your teen.** Even if your teen does not want time alone with you, remind him or her often that you are always available to listen or talk. One way to make yourself available is to offer rides; a great opportunity to talk (if the radio isn't too loud).
3. **When your teen talks**
 - Pay attention.
 - Watch, as well as listen.
 - Try not to interrupt.
 - Ask for further details if you don't understand.
 - If you don't have time to listen, set a time that will be good for both of you.
4. **Respect your teen.** It's OK to disagree with your teen, but disagree respectfully, not insultingly. Don't dismiss his or her feelings or opinions as silly or senseless. You may not always be able to help when your teen is upset about something, but it is important to say, "I want to understand," or "Help me understand."
5. **When rules are needed, set and enforce them.** Don't be afraid to be unpopular for a day or two. Believe it or not, teens see setting limits as a form of caring.
6. **Try not to get upset if your teen makes mistakes.** This will help your teen take responsibility for his or her actions. Remember to offer guidance when necessary. Direct the discussion toward solutions. For example, saying, "I get upset when I find clothes all over the floor," is much better than, "You're a slob."

Be willing to negotiate and compromise. This will teach problem solving in a healthy way. Remember to choose your battles. Let go of the little things that may not be worth a big fight.
7. **Criticize a behavior, not an attitude.** For example, instead of saying, "You're late. That's so irresponsible. And I don't like your attitude," try saying, "I worry about your safety when you're late. I trust you, but when I don't hear from you and don't know where you are, I wonder whether something bad has happened to you. What can we do together to help you get home on time and make sure I know where you are or when you're going to be late?"
8. **Mix criticism with praise.** Your teen needs to know how you feel when he or she is not doing what you want him or her to do.

Be sure to mix in positive feedback with this criticism. For example, "I'm proud that you are able to hold a job and get your homework done. I would like to see you use some of that energy to help do the dishes after meals."

9. **Let your teen be a teen.** Give your teen some leeway with regard to clothes, hairstyle, etc. Many teens go through a rebellious period in which they want to express themselves in ways that are different from their parents. However, be aware of the messages and ratings of the music, movies, and video games to which your teen is exposed.
10. **Be a parent first, not a friend.** Your teen's separation from you as a parent is a normal part of development. Don't take it personally.
11. **Don't be afraid to share mistakes you've made as a parent or as a teen.**
12. **Talk with your teen's pediatrician** if you need advice on how to talk with or get along with your teen.

Common questions

The following are answers to questions from parents of teens.

Dieting and body image

"My daughter is always trying new diets. How can I help her lose weight safely?"

Many teens resort to extreme diet or exercise programs because they want their bodies to look like the models, singers, actors, or athletes they see in the media.

Tips for a healthy diet

- Limit fast-food meals. Discuss the options available at fast-food restaurants and help your teen find a healthy, balanced diet. Fat should not come from junk food but from healthier foods such as low-fat cheese or low-fat yogurt.
- Keep the household supply of junk food such as candy, cookies, and potato chips to a minimum.
- Stock up on low-fat healthy items for snacking such as fruit, raw vegetables, whole-grain crackers, and low-fat yogurt. Encourage eating fruits and vegetables as snacks.
- Check with your teen's doctor about the proper amounts of calories, fat, protein, and carbohydrates for your teen.
- As a parent, model good eating habits. Make mealtime family time (5 times per week or more)—eating meals together helps with communication and reduces teen risk-taking.

Be aware of any diet or exercise program your daughter is following. Be watchful of how much weight she loses and make sure the diet program is healthy. Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa can be very dangerous. If you suspect your daughter has an eating disorder, talk with her doctor right away. Also, if you have a son, it's important to be aware of his diet or exercise habits too.

Many diets are unhealthy for teens because they do not have the nutritional value that bodies need during puberty. If your daughter wants to lose weight, urge her to increase physical activity and to take weight off slowly. Let her eat according to her own appetite, but make sure she gets enough fats, carbohydrates, protein, and calcium.

If your daughter decides to become a vegetarian, make certain she follows a healthy vegetarian diet. She may need to see her doctor or a nutritionist to ensure that she is getting enough fat, calories, protein, and calcium.

If your teen (like many teens) is unhappy with the way she looks, encourage healthy exercise. Physical activity will help stop hunger pangs, create a positive self-image, and take away the "blahs." If she wants to train with weights, she should check with her doctor, as well as a trainer, coach, or physical education teacher.

Help create a positive self-image by praising her wonderful qualities and focusing less on her appearance. Set a good example by making exercise and eating right a part of your daily routine also.

Dating and sex education

"With all the sex on TV, how can I teach my son to wait until he is ready?"

Teens (females and males) are naturally curious about sex. This is completely normal and healthy. However, teens may be pressured

into having sex too soon by their peers or the media. Talk with your son to understand his feelings and views about sex. Start early and provide him with access to information that is accurate and appropriate. Delaying sexual involvement could be the most important decision he makes.

Drugs

"I am afraid some of my daughter's friends have offered her drugs. How can I help her make the right decision?"

Teens may try or use tobacco and alcohol or other drugs to fit in or as a way to deal with peer pressure. Try to help build self-confidence or self-esteem in your teen. Ask your daughter about any concerns and problems she is facing and help her learn how to deal with strong emotions and cope with stress in ways that are healthy. For instance, encourage her to participate in leisure and outside activities with teens who don't drink and use drugs.

Smoking and tobacco

"My daughter smokes behind my back. How do I convince her to quit?"

Smoking can turn into a lifelong addiction that can be extremely hard to break. Discuss with your teen some of the more undesirable effects of smoking, including bad breath, stained teeth, wrinkles, a long-term cough, and decreased athletic performance. Long-term use can also lead to serious health problems like emphysema and cancer.

Chew or *snuff* can also lead to nicotine addiction and causes the same health problems as smoking cigarettes. In addition, mouth wounds or sores can form and may not heal easily. Smokeless tobacco can also lead to cancer.

If you suspect your daughter is smoking or using smokeless tobacco and you need advice, talk with her doctor. Schedule a visit with her doctor when you and your daughter can discuss the risks associated with smoking and the best ways to quit before it becomes a lifelong habit.

If you smoke . . . quit

If you or someone else in the household smokes, now is a good time to quit. Watching a parent struggle through the process of quitting can be a powerful message for a teen who is thinking about starting. It also shows that you care about your health, as well as your teen's.

Alcohol

"I know my son drinks once in a while, but it's just beer. Why should I worry?"

Alcohol is the most socially accepted drug in our society, and also one of the most abused and destructive. Even small amounts of alcohol can impair judgment, provoke risky and violent behavior, and slow down reaction time. An intoxicated teen (or anyone else) behind the wheel of a car makes it a lethal weapon. Alcohol-related car crashes are the leading cause of death for young adults aged 15 to 24 years.

Though it's illegal for people younger than 21 years to drink, we all know that most teens are not strangers to alcohol. Many of them are introduced to alcohol during childhood. If you choose to use alcohol

Talking with your teen about sex

Before your teen becomes sexually active, make sure you discuss the following topics:

- **Medical and physical risks.** Risks include unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, hepatitis B, syphilis, herpes, HIV (the virus that causes AIDS), and HPV (human papillomavirus—the virus that can cause cancers of the mouth and throat, cervix, and genitals in teens and adults).
- **Emotional risks.** Teens who have sex before they are emotionally ready may regret the decision when they are older or feel guilty, frightened, or ashamed from the experience. Your teen should ask himself or herself, "Am I ready to have sex?" or "What will happen after I have sex?"
- **Promoting safer sex.** Anyone who is sexually active needs to be aware of how to prevent unintended pregnancies, as well as how to protect against STIs. Condoms should always be used along with a second method of contraception to prevent pregnancy and reduce the risk of STIs.
- **Setting limits.** Make sure your teen has thought about what his or her sexual limits are before dating begins.

Most importantly, let your teen know that he or she can talk with you and his or her doctor about dating and relationships. Offer your guidance throughout this important stage in your teen's life.

in your home, be aware of the example you set for your teen. The following suggestions may help:

- Having a drink should never be shown as a way to cope with problems.
- Don't drink in unsafe conditions—for example, driving the car, mowing the lawn, and using the stove.
- Don't encourage your teen to drink or to join you in having a drink.
- Do not allow your children to drink alcohol before they reach the legal age and teach them never, ever to drink and drive.
- Never make jokes about getting drunk; make sure that your children understand that it is neither funny nor acceptable.
- Show your children that there are many ways to have fun without alcohol. Happy occasions and special events don't have to include drinking.

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Beyond Screen Time: A Parent's Guide to Media Use

Media in all forms, including TV, computers, and smartphones, can affect how children and teens feel, learn, think, and behave. However, parents (you) are still the most important influence.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourages you to help your children develop healthy media use habits early on. Read on to learn more.

Media Use and Your Children

You can decide what media use is best for your family. Remember, all children and teens need adequate sleep (8-12 hours, depending on age), physical activity (1 hour), and time away from media. (See the "Media Use Guidelines" chart for general guidelines for media use based on age.)

Because children today are growing up in a time of highly personalized media use experiences, parents must develop personalized media use plans for their children. Media plans should take into account each child's age, health, personality, and developmental stage. Create a Family Media Use Plan online at HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan. By creating a Family Media Use Plan, parents can help children and teens balance their media use with other healthy activities.

Why use digital media?

- Digital media use can
 - Expose users to new ideas and information.
 - Raise awareness of current events and issues.
 - Promote community participation.
 - Help students work with others on assignments and projects.
- Digital media use also has social benefits that
 - Allow families and friends to stay in touch, no matter where they live.
 - Enhance access to valuable support networks, especially for people with illnesses or disabilities.
 - Help promote wellness and healthy behaviors, such as how to quit smoking or how to eat healthy.

Why limit media use?

Overuse of digital media may place your children at risk of

- **Not enough sleep.** Children with more media exposure or who have a TV, computer, or mobile device in their bedroom sleep less and fall asleep later at night. Even babies can be overstimulated by screens and miss the sleep they need to grow. Exposure to light (particularly blue light) and stimulating content from screens can delay or disrupt sleep and have a negative effect on school.
- **Delays in learning and social skills.** Children who watch too much TV in infancy and preschool years can show delays in attention, thinking, language, and social skills. One of the reasons for the delays could be because they interact less with parents and family. Parents who keep the TV on or focus on their own digital media miss precious opportunities to interact with their children and help them learn. Children and teens often use entertainment media

at the same time they're doing other things, such as homework. Such multitasking can have a negative effect on school.

- **Obesity.** Watching TV for more than 1.5 hours daily is a risk factor for obesity for children 4 through 9 years of age. Teens who watch more than 5 hours of TV per day are 5 times more likely to have overweight than teens who watch 0 to 2 hours. Food advertising and snacking while watching TV can promote obesity. Also, children who overuse media are less apt to be active with healthy, physical play.
- **Behavior problems.** Violent content on TV and screens can contribute to behavior problems in children, either because they are scared and confused by what they see or they try to mimic on-screen characters.
- **Problematic Internet use.** Children who overuse online media can be at risk for problematic Internet use. Heavy video gamers are at risk for Internet gaming disorder. They spend most of their free time online and show less interest in off-line or real-life relationships. There may be increased risks for depression at both the high and low ends of Internet use.
- **Risky behaviors.** Teens' displays on social media often show risky behaviors, such as substance use, sexual behaviors, self-injury, or eating disorders. Exposure of teens through media to alcohol, tobacco use, or sexual behaviors is associated with earlier initiation of these behaviors.
- **Sexting, loss of privacy, and predators.** Sexting is sending nude or seminude images, as well as sexually explicit text messages, using a cell phone. About 12% of youth 10 to 19 years of age have sent a sexual photo to someone else. Teens need to know that once content is shared with others, they may not be able to delete or remove it completely. They may also not know about or choose not to use privacy settings. Another risk is that sex offenders may use social networking, chat rooms, e-mail, and online games to contact and exploit children.
- **Cyberbullying.** Children and teens online can be victims of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can lead to short- and long-term negative social, academic, and health issues for both the bully and target. Fortunately, programs to help prevent bullying may reduce cyberbullying.

More Media Use Tips for Parents, Families, and Caregivers

- Do not feel pressured to introduce technology early. Media interfaces are intuitive, and children can learn quickly.
- Find out what type of and how much media are used and what media behaviors are appropriate for each child—and for you. Place consistent limits on hours of media use as well as types of media used.
- Select and co-view media with your child so your child can use media to learn, be creative, and share these experiences with your family.
- Check your children's media use for their health and safety.

Media Use Guidelines

Age	Description	Tips
Younger than 2 years	<p>Children younger than 2 learn and grow when they explore the physical world around them. Their minds learn best when they interact and play with parents, siblings, caregivers, and other children and adults.</p> <p>Children younger than 2 have a hard time understanding what they see on screen media and how it relates to the world around them.</p> <p>However, children 18–24 months of age can learn from high-quality educational media, IF their parents play or view with them and reteach the lessons.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media use should be very limited and only when an adult is standing by to co-view, talk, and teach (for example, video chatting with family along with parents). • For children 18–24 months, if you want to introduce digital media, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Choose high-quality programming. ◦ Use media together with your child. ◦ Avoid solo media use.
2–5 years of age	<p>At 2 years of age, many children can understand and learn words from live video chatting. Young children can listen to or join a conversation with their parents.</p> <p>Children 3–5 years of age have more mature minds, so a well-designed educational program such as Sesame Street (in moderation) can help children learn social, language, and reading skills.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit screen use to no more than 1 hour per day. • Find other activities for your children to do that are healthy for their bodies and minds. • Choose media that is interactive, nonviolent, educational, and pro-social. • Co-view or co-play with your children.
5 years and older	<p>Today’s grade-schoolers and teens are growing up immersed in digital media. They may even have their own mobile device and other devices to access digital media.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure media use is not displacing other important activities, such as sleep, family time, and exercise. • Check your children’s media use for their health and safety.
Tweens and teens	<p>Tweens and teens are more likely to have some independence in what they choose and watch, and they may be consuming media without parental oversight.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents should engage tweens and teens in conversations about their media use, digital citizenship, what they’ve seen or read, who they are communicating with, and what they have learned from their media use.

See *More Media Use Tips for Parents, Families, and Caregivers*. Also, create a Family Media Use Plan online at HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan. A Family Media Use Plan is useful to set consistent expectations and limits on media use for parents, children, and teens.

- Stop use of devices or screens for 1 hour before bedtime. Do not let your children sleep with devices such as smartphones.
- Discourage entertainment media while doing homework.
- Plan media-free times together, such as family dinners.
- Decide on media-free, unplugged locations in homes, such as bedrooms.
- Engage in family activities that promote well-being, such as sports, reading, and talking with each other.
- Set a good example. Turn off the TV and put your smartphone on “do not disturb” during media-free times with your family.
- Use sites like Common Sense Media (www.commonsensemedia.org) to help you decide if movies, TV shows, apps, and video games are age and content appropriate for your children and your family values.
- Share your family media rules with caregivers or grandparents to help ensure rules are consistent.
- Talk with your children and teens about online citizenship and safety. This includes treating others with respect online, avoiding cyberbullying and sexting, being wary of online solicitations, and safeguarding privacy.
- Remember that your opinion counts. TV, video games, and other media producers, airers, and sponsors pay attention to the views of the public. For more information from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), visit <http://reboot.fcc.gov/parents>.
- Encourage your school and community to advocate for better media programs and healthier habits. For example, organize a Screen-Free Week in your town with other parents, teachers, and neighbors.

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A Parent's Guide to Teen Parties

As a parent, you know the importance of your teen's social life and that parties are a way to socialize and relax. But an unsupervised or poorly planned party can result in unwanted or even tragic consequences. However, parental responsibility is the key to a fun and safe party.

The following is important information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about teen parties.



Facts about teen parties

- **Guest List.** When a teen plans a party, news spreads very quickly via social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter. Because of these new media, teen parties can grow too large for parents to control.
- **Time and Place.** Teen parties often start late at night and move from house to house.

Facts about alcohol and drugs

Teens often expect alcohol and marijuana at parties. Some parents believe that it is better to allow teens to drink in their home so they can keep them safe. While this idea may be well intentioned, it is simply misguided. Parents cannot keep impaired teens safe.

Alcohol and other drugs impair judgment. Teens are more likely to have sex, be involved in a violent incident, or suffer an injury after using drugs or alcohol. All too frequently teens die from violence, unintentional injuries, or overdoses related to alcohol and other drugs.

Alcohol affects teens differently than adults. For example, compared with adults, teens are more likely to remain awake, to wander about, or to drive a car while having a much greater degree of mental impairment.

What parents need to know

Communication and honesty are important to keep your teen safe. Teens whose parents talk with them regularly about drugs and alcohol are 42% less likely to use substances than those whose parents don't. Tell your teens that you expect them not to use alcohol or other drugs at parties.

Parent networking is the best prevention tool to combat underage drinking. Get to know your teen's friends and their parents. If your teen is planning on going to a party, call the parents to ensure that they will be home and that they will not allow drugs or alcohol. If this is not possible, don't let your teen go.

Parents are legally responsible for anything that happens to a minor who has been served alcohol or other drugs in their home. If anyone brings alcohol or other drugs to your home, be prepared to contact their parents. And if someone comes to your home already intoxicated, make sure that they get home safely. Help your teen feel responsible for this as well.

Parents may be criminally or civilly liable if...

- Alcohol is provided to a minor at a party they have organized.
- Someone's property is damaged.
- Someone is injured.
- Someone leaves and gets into a car accident and/or injures someone else.
- Someone dies.

Understand the local laws about alcohol and other drugs. Laws about alcohol and drug use vary from state to state, so make sure you know what the laws are in your state.

If you are hosting a teen party...

- **Plan in Advance.** Go over party plans with your teen. Encourage your teen to plan non-alcohol-related group activities or games. Back to Top
- **Keep parties small.** Ten to 15 teens for each adult. Make sure at least one adult is present at all times. Ask other parents to come over to help you if you need it.
- **Set a guest list.** The party should be for invited guests only. No "crashers" allowed. This will help avoid the "open party" situation.
- **Set starting and ending times for the party.** Check local curfew laws to determine an ending time.
- **Set party "rules" and your expectations.** Discuss them with your teen before the party. Rules should include the following:
 - No tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs.
 - No one can leave the party and then return.
 - Lights are left on at all times.
 - Certain rooms of the house are off-limits.
- **Have plenty of food and non-alcoholic beverages available.** Also, put your alcohol and any prescription or over-the-counter medicines in a locked cabinet.
- **Be there, but not square.** Pick out a spot where you can see what is going on without being in the way. You can also help serve snacks and beverages.

If your teen is going to a party...

- **Know where your teen is going and how long he will be there.** Have the phone number and address of the party. Ask your teen to call you if the location of the party changes. Be sure to let your teen know where you will be during the party.
- **Call the parent of the party host** to make sure a parent will be home the entire time and supervising the party. Make sure that tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs will not be allowed.
- **Talk with your teen beforehand** about how to handle a situation where alcohol is available at a party.
- **Make sure your teen has a way to get to and from the party.** Make it easy for your teen to leave a party by making it clear that he can call at any time for a ride home. Discuss why he might need to make such a call. Remind your teen NEVER to ride home with a driver who has been drinking or using other drugs.
- **Be up to greet your teen when he comes home.** This can be a good way to check the time and talk about the evening.
- If your teen is **staying overnight** at a friend's house after the party, verify this arrangement with the friend's parents and that they will be home.

The AAP Committee on Adolescence and AAP Section on Adolescent Health would like to thank the AAP Committee on Substance Abuse and AAP NY Chapter 2 Committee on Adolescence for their assistance in developing this publication.

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Independence, One Step at a Time

It is an adolescent's job to gain the confidence to be able to stand on his own. As challenging as it is to watch our children grow up, it is critical to their well-being and to the health of our relationships that we honor their growing independence. When we hold them back they rebel against us. When we monitor their safety while guiding them towards independence – sometimes actively and sometimes by getting out of the way – they appreciate us. When our children know that we supported them to become independent, they will return to us for that interdependence that defines loving families well beyond childhood.



It's everyday issues, even seemingly mundane ones, that trigger most parent-child struggles and offer opportunities for fostering independence. Your child thinks she should be allowed a new privilege just because she's a certain age or because her friends are doing it, but she might lack the skills needed to manage the situation. If you focus on preparing your adolescent, you will turn potential sources of conflict and rebellion into opportunities for your child to master new skills and demonstrate responsibility.

Adolescence is naturally filled with opportunities for trial and error and ultimately success. Your challenge is to make sure your adolescent learns from day-to-day mistakes rather than views them as catastrophes. At the same time you need to be vigilant in helping your teen avoid those errors that could cause irreparable harm. Just as importantly, you want to ensure your child doesn't miss out on the many possibilities for growth that are coming along.

The answer to when your child is ready to meet a new challenge is about recognizing when there are enough pieces in place so the chances for success are enhanced. A request by your 14 year old to spend the afternoon at the mall won't hinge on answering on the spot "*Is she old enough?*" if you've taught her, in part through your example, about spending wisely and treating clerks with respect. The day your teen begins to drive won't be so nerve-wracking if you've modeled safe driving behaviors and made it clear you will monitor your teen's progress even after he gets his license.

Sometimes you should start by doing some observing. Think back to when you baby-proofed your home. If you just guessed what needed safeguarding, you might have missed some opportunities to protect your baby. The first step was to walk around on your knees and see the surroundings at the same level as your toddler. Once you saw the world from his vantage point, you knew to turn that pot handle inward. That same sort of observing — getting a "kid's eye view" of the mall or the route to school — will heighten your senses about the challenges your teen is likely to encounter. You'll be better positioned to think of how best to phase in new privileges and what kinds of support and monitoring need to be in place to help things go smoothly.

It is important to use a step-by-step approach to allow your child to demonstrate he's ready to assume more responsibility. A thoughtful step-wise strategy will help both your child and you gain confidence, and will allow you to give a little bit of rope at a time and tighten up again as needed.

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Adolescent Sexuality: Talk the Talk Before They Walk the Walk

Adolescence can be tough enough to get through without questions of sex, sexuality, and sexual identity. But adolescents are humans, too — no matter how alien they may seem to their parents at times. Openly addressing the all-too-human questions of sexual development, sexual desire, and the nature of the adolescent's developing sexual identity are critical. Sharing factual information with and giving good moral guidance to your teenager is a vitally important part of helping your teen understand herself or himself. It can help your child avoid devastating, and possibly life-threatening, errors in judgment.



"Above all, it is critical that parents be truthful, honest, and available to their children," says Charles R. Wibbelsman, M.D., FAAP, Chief of Adolescent Medicine at Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco and a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Adolescence.

"Parents often have their own agenda — don't do this and don't do that. But they need to take a step back and leave the judgments aside for this discussion," says Warren Seigel, M.D., FAAP, Chairman of the Pediatrics Department and Director of Adolescent Medicine at Coney Island Hospital, Brooklyn, N.Y. "The most appropriate and important thing for a parent and a child or adolescent in dealing with questions about sexuality and sexual health is an open channel of communication."

The Messages They Get

In today's hyper-sexualized culture of Internet sites, mass media entertainers, and 24/7 programming, the traditional "birds and bees" lecture (or pamphlet handed to the child to read on her or his own) on reproductive basics is completely inadequate. Carefully preparing children for the normal changes in their bodies as well as the endless assault of peer pressure, media glorification of irresponsible sexuality, and advertising come-ons is the only way to create a sense of security for parents and children alike.

"There are a lot of things in the media that are not appropriate for a particular age," says Dr. Wibbelsman, who is co-author of *The Teenage Body Book* and *Growing and Changing*. "We don't put children on the street and wish them luck before sending them out on their own. We hold their hands. We educate them about the risks. And we trust them with increasing responsibility only as they're old enough and show they're ready to handle it."

"The media particularly and everything around us talks about sex," adds Dr. Seigel. "It's hard to avoid it."

The only foolproof approach to sexual safety, of course, is to say "no" and defer sexual activity until later in life. The good news is that as many as half of all adolescents do just that. But that leaves the other half at risk — many of them engaging in unprotected sex, exposing themselves to potentially grave disease and unwanted pregnancy.

"The most important thing to teach your child is responsibility," Dr. Seigel says. "Discuss how to make decisions and understand what the consequences of decisions will be. You can start by discussing decisions and consequences that don't involve sex, and then move the conversation toward sexuality. After all, there are consequences to having sex or not having sex, and every child is going to get a lot of misinformation along the way from their peers and the media."

The pressures upon children — from peers and also the media as mentioned above — may actually offer one of the most effective pathways to opening what must be an ongoing dialogue about sex and sexuality, not a single talk or lecture. What to do, then? It's good to turn these encounters with the media into teachable moments.

"Seeing something in the media that is obviously sexually charged can be a springboard for conversation between adolescent and parent," says Dr. Wibbelsman. "Is the ad bad or good? What's the ad trying to say? Use this moment as an opportunity to teach and encourage, not to pronounce a harsh, dismissive judgment. By engaging the child and building his self-esteem and her confidence in her ability to make judgments, you're showing him that you respect what he's learning and how she's growing in her decision-making."

After all, however adult their appearance, behavior, and attitudes may appear, adolescents remain closer to childhood than adulthood, and children need ongoing parental guidance to prepare for adulthood. "I know it's a lot of work, but parents need to monitor what their children see and be there, available to them, to provide some context," says Dr. Wibbelsman. "Find out what's in the movie, what's in the program, what's on that Internet site before you let your child see or hear. And experience with him or her together, so you can discuss it and use it to build trust between you."

Starting the Discussion

So when is the right time to start talking about sex with your child? It's a good idea to start laying the groundwork for these conversations long before the onset of puberty. The more frequently and frankly sexual matters are discussed, the easier and even more open such discussions are likely to be as you both grow comfortable with talking about it. "Let's face it, we're all embarrassed to talk about sex with each other," Dr. Seigel says. "The easiest way to start is to be real with your adolescent: 'This is really hard for me to talk about, and it was hard for me to talk about with my dad when I was your age.' But it's important to talk about, and we have to talk about embarrassing things sometimes."

Keep reminding your child that you are in her corner every step of the way. "Never let them forget that your love is unconditional," Dr. Seigel says. "Tell them, 'I am here with you, and I love you and I will be here with you no matter what through all of this.' Yes, it's much easier said than done, but no less important."

So what should you talk about? Perhaps start with how sexuality is portrayed in the media and, far more importantly, how it "works" in real life — the potentially bad consequences and catastrophes than can be a result of sexual activity, as well as the pleasure and positive results of responsible sexuality (remember: the job here is to be honest.) "You see a character in a TV show who's made a decision with regard to sex," Dr. Seigel says. "Start the discussion there, but don't make it your soapbox. If you harshly criticize what you're both seeing, your child will assume there's no discussion to be had, and there goes your channel of communication."

By approaching the topic carefully and conversationally, you and your child are much more likely to sort through the complexities together.

Keeping the Channels Open

As your child matures — physically, mentally, and emotionally — opportunities will emerge for making regular discussions about sexuality part of your continuing conversation. Obviously, changes in your child's body as puberty begins are crucial markers for such conversations.

One area that should receive particular attention is "urban myths" — bits of false information that "everyone" knows, passed along from adolescent to adolescent (and even from generation to generation: Don't be surprised to find that your child has heard some of the same myths and misinformation that circulated during your adolescence). Make clear, for instance, that oral sex is not without risks, that unprotected intercourse without ejaculation is not effective birth control, and so on. "It's very important to get the facts straight from the start, and share those facts with your child," says Dr. Wibbelsman. "That builds trust, and that trust is critical to guiding your adolescent through these challenging times."

In particular, be specific and accurate about the risks or pregnancy, the effectiveness (and limitations) of different types of birth control, and the variety of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and their effects. (See "Helpful Resources" at the bottom of this page for reliable resources of information on these subjects.)

Countering the Pressure

One key area to emphasize is that no one has the right to pressure your daughter or son to have sex. Peer pressure — and the media pressure that often stimulates it — can be addressed by empowering your children with your belief in their ability to withstand such pressure, a sense of values that are more important than immediate gratification, and their absolute freedom to bring any concerns to you.

It is wholly natural for adolescents to have questions about sex and sexual identity. While attitudes toward gay and lesbian identity (among other issues) remain tangled and complex, the crucial thing to bear in mind is that all of us have such questions at one time or another. "Parents need to be open about that and understand the entire spectrum of sexuality and sexual orientation, and not try to funnel them into a particular niche or area," says Dr. Wibbelsman. "Accept the adolescent's questions as part of growing up, because that's exactly what it is. But at the same time, let the adolescent know what your views and values are. Know the difference between facts and your opinion, and be clear about both."

But how to do it in a way that helps keep the channels open? It's a four-letter word, actually. "The key is to let adolescents know that you love them no matter who they become," Dr. Seigel says. "They may turn out tall, short, heavy, thin, healthy, or sickly — but you'll love them no matter what, no matter what decisions they make. That is much easier said than done for many parents, but that's key to raising a healthy adolescent."

And don't hesitate to discuss values, morals, and ethics with regard to sex — without lecturing, but with guidance. By providing your child with a solid framework of information and values, you've taken a large step toward making sure that when he or she becomes sexually active it will be with the knowledge, preparation, and maturity that will mark the transition to sexual activity as an informed choice, not a risky accident.

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