



Sexual Behavior in Pre-Teens and Teens

What Parents Should be Talking to Their Teens About

WHAT IS A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

A healthy relationship is when two people are **MUTUALLY INVOLVED** in the relationship. There is a mutual understanding of what the relationship is, and both parties are consenting to the relationship without pressure from the other person. This includes consenting to holding hands, putting arms around each other, kissing, touching, using protection, and sexual acts. When teens choose to be sexually active, it should be based on a healthy foundation of mutual respect, acceptance, and enjoyment, in which both parties are getting something positive out of the relationship. In a healthy relationship, there is no coercion or coercive behaviors.

WHAT IS COERCIVE BEHAVIOR?

Coercion is when a person uses force, intimidation, tricks, power, status, threats, bribes, drugs, or alcohol to get someone to go along with something that he or she wants them to do. Coercion is when a person is pressured in a negative way to do something that he or she doesn't want to do.

- Includes threatening to hurt them physically or the person's family
- Includes bribing younger kids with toys, video games, or treats
- Includes giving the person drugs or alcohol to get them to do something
- Includes putting them down or hurting them emotionally if they don't agree to do something

WHAT ARE THE RULES OF CONSENT?

True consent occurs when both parties have a full understanding of what the relationship is and what sexual behaviors are about to happen.

- For all teens and preteens, their partner cannot be 3 or more years younger than they are, even if both parties agree. In other words, even if the child/teen verbally agrees, their consent does not count because they are not considered old enough to understand what they are consenting to.
- Similarly, both parties need to be intellectually equal, emotionally equal, and developmentally equal. There cannot be anything that is considered a power differential between the two parties.
- Both parties are being honest with one another about what the relationship is and what is about to happen.
- Either party has a right to disagree with a certain behavior or refuse to engage in a certain behavior without fear of penalty. In other words, they have a right to say "NO" without feeling pressured, "guilted", or any worries about retribution.
- Either party has a right to say "NO" or change their mind, even if the sexual behavior has already been initiated

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HOW DO I KNOW IF A RELATIONSHIP IS TOXIC?

A relationship is toxic when it is emotionally destructive to at least one party. Toxic relationships can occur when one party persistently attempts to control the other, and the relationship is no longer mutual. One party often feels put down, disrespected and/or devalued leading to a reduction in self-esteem. Often, there is frequent arguing, a lack of open communication, and/or one party may feel that they need to go along with the other to minimize conflict.

IS MASTURBATION NORMAL?

It is important to educate preteens and teens about masturbation. Young people are reaching puberty earlier and earlier, so they may be engaging in these behaviors earlier than parents might think. Masturbation is normal and quite common for both boys and girls starting around the age of puberty.

WHAT IS SEXTING?

Sexting is when a person sends sexually explicit text messages or pictures electronically, usually through cell phones. Sexting is illegal when pictures are sent of the other person without their consent. Sexting is illegal when a picture of someone is sent who is under 18 or when a picture is being sent to someone who is under 18.

Sexting leaves teens vulnerable to becoming humiliated, used, hurt, or exposed to dangerous situations, and for this reason mental health professionals strongly discourage teens against sexting.

IS IT NORMAL FOR MY TEEN TO WATCH PORNOGRAPHY ON THEIR PHONE?

With the advent of the Internet, viewing pornography is increasingly available for teens. It is easy to access on all electronic devices and is probably most prominently accessed using smartphones. As it is so common, it is now considered normal adolescent behavior for teens (of any gender) to access pornography.

WHEN DOES PORNOGRAPHY BECOME HARMFUL?

Pornography is harmful if your teen is engaging in it in a compulsive way and they cannot control it. It is also harmful if it is interfering with their functioning, such as issues related to school, work, extracurricular activities, family, or peer relationships.

Pornography becomes harmful when there is an aggressive component to it such as rape, or some other violent or aggressive behavior that includes coercion.

Child pornography is against the law and is always problematic.

It is also important to note that with the recent advances in AI, preteens and teens are using AI technology to engage in sexualized talk with AI bots. As a new technology, this is a new frontier, and parents should be aware and be monitoring for these types of activities. Just as with pornography, the use of AI for sexualized encounters is not problematic in and of itself, but can be if the teens/preteens are up all night and it is interfering with normal teenage activities. Parents need to be aware of these emerging technologies and to facilitate open discussions about these activities with their teens and preteens.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT MY TEEN'S SEXUAL BEHAVIOR?

If you have concerns about your child's behavior or that something sexual may have happened to them, a great first step is to talk to your pediatrician or family doctor.