

## Teaching Our *Daughters* About Sexuality

One of the hardest tasks of parenthood, but also one of the most important and rewarding, is teaching a child about sexuality. What do I say? When do I start? We live in a sexually open society where movies, songs, and conversations often include references to sex. Advertising sells products with sex, and radio and TV programs use sexual situations to entertain us. You can begin to help your daughter understand that many of these depictions or illustrations of sex are shallow. Commercialized sex is misleading because it shows sex only as glamorous and trouble-free. By helping your daughter understand the special significance of our sexuality, you can begin to develop conversations with her about sex as well as help her to make positive sexual choices.

Try to remember your own early curiosity about sex. What did you want to know? How did you find answers to your questions? What do you wish had been different about your education or experiences? You may remember that much of what you learned from friends, or pieced together yourself, often turned out to be untrue. Even though our society probably treats sexuality differently today than when you were a teen, young people still have many of the same questions and needs that you did. What your daughter really needs is for you to provide answers to her questions, to be there to listen, and to help her to form educated opinions and decisions. This can be accomplished through everyday conversations with her. In fact, when sexuality is discussed as a part of everyday situations, rather than having the “big talk,” parents (and youth) often find the experience more comfortable. To help you with this, consider the following issues as you guide your daughter in understanding her sexuality and sexual decisions.

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### **Physical Changes**

Girls need to understand that changes are normal and happen at different rates for different girls. The awkwardness will not last. They also need to know what to expect in terms of a growth spurt, hair growth, and menstruation. Parents should also familiarize themselves with, and teach their daughters, the following terms: fallopian tubes, ovaries, menstruation, uterus, urethra, clitoris, labia majora, labia minora, vulva, hymen, vagina, anus, rectum, and cervix. There are many resources for parents and teens about these changes and terms listed at the end of this brochure.

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### **Sexual Intercourse**

Girls wonder exactly what it is, how it feels, and when it is okay to have intercourse. They also need to know the place of intercourse within a loving relationship. Explain that intercourse occurs when a man places his erect penis inside a woman's vagina, and that this can lead to pregnancy. Teens also need to understand that it is never okay to have intercourse unless both partners understand the consequences and willingly agree.

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### **Masturbation**

Girls need to know that this is one way that many people handle their sexual feelings and pressures. If you are uncomfortable addressing this issue with your daughter, give her resources to explore this issue on her own. Reassure your daughter that getting familiar and comfortable with her own body, how it functions, and how it responds to touching is a normal part of understanding herself.

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### **Peer Pressure**

Girls need to learn how to handle their desires and pressures that some friends may put on them to become sexually active. Your daughter will be tempted in many situations over the course of her adolescent years. Learning to handle sexual feelings and to make mature decisions is part of growing up.

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### **Decision-Making**

One of the most important choices your daughter will make is when to have intercourse. Delaying intercourse until maturity is beneficial for teens, but most of them need help and support to do so. Of course, the teen years are filled with lots of decisions about risky behaviors. Coping with the consequences of good and poor decisions is an important step to maturity.

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### **Values**

Girls sometimes feel tremendous pressure to participate in sexual acts by both friends and boyfriends. They fear being made fun of or rejected by peers. Talk to your daughter about making responsible decisions as well as the difference between positive and negative popularity.

If your daughter decides to delay having sex, this does not mean that the decision will stay made. Young people have to make this decision over and over again, which may become increasingly difficult. Therefore, it is essential to talk with your daughter about protecting herself and her partner, and how to use birth control correctly. This part of sexuality education is as essential as all others, even if she intends to delay intercourse. Some parents fear that discussing contraception will encourage sexual activity, but the opposite is true.

Many parents assume that their daughter knows all about birth control, where to get it, and how to properly use it. Unfortunately, she probably does not. The resources included at the end of this publication will help you and your daughter familiarize yourselves with methods and their effectiveness. Important topics are abstinence, birth control pills, IUD/intrauterine devices, diaphragms, foam, condoms, and natural family planning. Many parents include the risks of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, when discussing contraception.

Perhaps the most important part of teaching your daughter about sex and her own sexuality is not the facts that you present to her, but the manner and sincerity with which you deliver those facts. Letting her know your values is very important. Despite how you may sometimes feel, teens still look to parents as an important source of guidance and boundaries. Regardless of what values are taught in the home, young people will consider many attitudes and opinions before they decide on their own sexual values. Be patient and understanding as your daughter explores and makes decisions. And always keep the lines of communication open. In addition, keep the following points in mind.

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*Listen, listen, listen.* All children need to feel that their ideas or concerns about sex are worth listening to.

*Look for natural opportunities to talk to your daughter.* Don't wait until she comes to you with questions or comments about sex. Take advantage of natural openings to talk about sexuality (e.g., television programs, newspaper stories or in the car).

*Listen carefully for hidden feelings.* Many times children have trouble saying exactly what they mean, especially when it comes to sex.

*Try to avoid judging your child.* Making harsh judgments or criticizing your daughter's attitudes about sex will often cut off communication.

*Let your daughter express her feelings freely.* Many young people have values or opinions about sex that are different from those of their parents. Remember, these may not be firmly held ideas or values, but only part of the sorting-out process. First, listen to what your child has to say. If you agree, say so. If you disagree, clearly state your own viewpoint and why you feel that way.

*Don't cut off communication.* Parents sometimes lose the chance to help their child think and talk about sex because they begin to nag, preach or moralize. Your child needs to know that talking about sex is two-way communication. Pose questions to your daughter that, when she answers, will help make the best decision obvious.

*Avoid over-/under-answering questions.* Answer questions directly, in words she understands. Don't assume that a simple question about sex needs an answer far beyond what was asked. Ask your daughter to share back with you what she understands has been said.

*Help your daughter develop strong self-esteem.* A healthy self-concept is important for teens to make good decisions about sexual issues. A well-known educator has said, "Hope is the best contraceptive."

On a final note, remember that there are plenty of resources for you as parents to help you talk effectively with your daughter about sexuality. You do not need to be an expert to talk effectively with your children. You may want to keep a reference book in your home, not only for your own knowledge but also as a resource for your children when they want to explore issues on their own. If you do not have a partner of the other sex, consider asking a trusted friend to talk occasionally with your daughter from that perspective. The resources listed below, and many others available from your library or online, will give you information and encouragement to answer many of the questions that you or your daughter might have.

## Putting Knowledge to Work

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### SELECTED SEXUALITY EDUCATION RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND TEENS

#### Books

- What's Happening to My Body? for Girls [Boys]: A Growing-Up Guide for Parents and Daughters [Sons], Lynda Madaras, 1987
- From Diapers to Dating, Debra Haffner, 1999
- Growing and Changing: A Handbook for Preteens, Kathy McCoy, 1987
- Everything You Need to Know About Growing Up Female [Male], Bruce Glassman, 1997
- Red Light Green Light: Preventing Teen Pregnancy, Janet Colberg, 1997
- The Underground Guide to Teenage Sexuality: An Essential Handbook for Today's Teens & Parents, Michael Basso, 1997
- Everything You Need to Know About Birth Control, Gary Mucciolo, 1996
- Sex: The Challenge of the Teen Years (Teenage Sexuality), Jean Lundberg, 1995
- AIDS: What Teens Want To Know, Barbara Christie-Dever, 1996.

#### Websites

- National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy: <http://www.teenpregnancy.org>
- Sexuality Information & Education Council of the US: <http://www.siecus.org>
- Learning Network Family Education: <http://familyeducation.com>