Love them.
Talk about Sex.
A guide to help parents communicate with their children on sexuality issues

Err...... it's...... ermm......

Pa, what's it like to kiss a girl?
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Some of you might have had the chance to speak to your child about the "birds and the bees" while others might be dreading the day when you have to have that talk with your son or daughter. You might think that you grew up without your parents ever saying a word about sex and you turned out fine!

If only things were that simple.

Your child is growing up in a completely different world and has incredible access to information – movies, books, magazines and of course, the internet in which information often comes in very vivid moving pictures! This is why your role in your child’s sexuality education is more important than ever before.

No matter where and who your child gets information from, you are his or her best resource, simply because he or she gets life-long lessons on what is right and wrong from you. Studies have shown that if parents are involved in their children’s sexuality education, the chances of risky and irresponsible sexual behaviour decrease.

We hope that the information here will help guide you as you start this journey with your preteen or teen. This guide is divided into four sections: Communication, Changes, Challenges and Consequences.

Studies have shown that if parents are involved in their children’s sexuality education, the chances of risky and irresponsible sexual behaviour decrease.
**Communication** will give you tips on talking to your child about sexuality issues.

**Changes** will touch on how you can help your child cope with the physical and psychological changes that arise during puberty.

**Challenges** will deal with the key issues you and your child will face as he/she enters the peak of puberty and beyond.

**Consequences** will help you highlight to your child the consequences of unprotected sex, namely unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, on the rise among teens in Singapore.

The ages suggested in the following pages are just a guide. You will know your child best to decide when to talk to him/her about the various aspects of sexuality. Suggestions have been provided for handling commonly surfaced issues. You may wish to adapt them to suit your own unique family circumstances.

**Talking about sex with your child is not easy. But, it can be a great way to build your relationship and trust with your child. Start and you will find that it gets easier. But first, you need to be prepared yourself.**

- Build up your knowledge about sexuality issues. Get more information from other parents or resources e.g. books, magazines, websites, etc.

- Talk to your spouse beforehand and decide on what messages you want to give (e.g. are you going to talk about abstinence only or do you want to include information on protection?).
Hat you want to achieve
A healthy relationship with your child that is open, not judgemental, and able to give and take.

Any dialogue with your child, particularly on sexuality issues, is about communicating. This is more than just telling your child what you want him or her to know.

Golden rules of good communication

Pay attention
Switch off the TV, put down the papers, put away your mobile phone, and look at your child. It shows he/she is important to you and that you are willing to give him/her the time to discuss and ask questions.

Listening is not the same as hearing
Many people can hear, but not everyone listens well. Listening means keeping eye contact, not talking when your child is talking, letting him/her finish and not interrupting when you think he/she has said something silly or embarrassing.

Ask instead of telling
Instead of preaching or telling your child how things should be, ask questions that will help you to understand him/her better. “How do you feel about this? What do you think might be the consequences? How does it feel when that happens?” Ask open-ended questions to allow your child to explain his/her thoughts, feelings and wishes. And when you do talk about your wishes, make sure you explain WHY you feel that way. Don’t just say: “I don’t want you to have sex, just study!” Explain why early sex might be confusing to your child, because while his/her body is all adult, his/her mind isn’t ready for such a complicated thing and it can lead to serious consequences.

Ask open-ended questions to allow your child to explain his/her thoughts, feelings and wishes.
Avoid attack
Your child is not your enemy but your words can be. When you belittle or criticize, you will lose your audience, sometimes never to get it back again. So don't drag out a long list of past "mistakes". Respect your child as an honest, intelligent and loving person and he/she is more likely to do things to keep your respect.

Never give up on communicating
If you face a set back, find a person who can help out, preferably someone your child trusts, and don’t interfere. Be prepared to also adjust your views and expectations. The world you grew up in was a very different place from the one your child is in now. The pressures he/she faces are tremendous and he/she may be finding it hard to cope.
When to start the conversation on sex

The information has to come in the right doses – just like medication. For toddlers, talk about parts of the body. For eight year olds, extend this talk to their reproductive systems and by 11 or 12 years of age, you can introduce what happens when two people have sex. By 13, you can talk about dating and consequences of early sexual activity.

Remember, this is just a guide - you know your child best and hence the right time to initiate this conversation. In general, if you start this conversation when your child is 15, experts say it might be too late. He/she might have formed opinions and ideas from friends and other sources and you would have missed the boat. However, if you are already in this situation, you should still try.

How to start the conversation on sex

Seize "teachable moments"

When you see a pregnant woman, that may be a good way to start a conversation on how babies are born. Or when you come across condoms in the supermarket and your child asks what they are, it can also lead to a discussion on having babies. When you are watching a movie together and a love scene comes up, you can talk about being in love and why people fall in love. If your child asks you something about his/her body or about relationships, use that to get a discussion going.
Start on an honest note
Let your teen know right from the start where the conversation is going. Your child might be likely to feel embarrassed to talk about intimate sexual feelings. Seek your child’s consent upfront by saying something like “I want to be a good parent but I am not going to ask you embarrassing questions”. Then your child is likely to feel more at ease.

Ask questions
It would be great if your child asks questions – you can use these to go deeper into the topic. But, if your child is not asking anything, here are some questions you can ask to start a conversation:

Conversation starters
- Do your classmates talk about sex? What do they talk about?
- Have you ever thought about having a girlfriend / boyfriend?
- Have you thought about when you might have sex?
- Do you think teen sex is okay? Do you think some teens have sex to impress their friends or to fit in? Why?
- Have you heard or read about teenagers who are pregnant? How do you feel about that?
What should you say?

Do you say it is okay to go on single dates? Is having a steady relationship out of the question when your child is still schooling? Sex is very closely tied in with values and principles and each of us has a different set. Some of us have religions which have very clear guidelines on what is acceptable and what is not and these should be set out at the beginning.

It is best to decide, as a couple, what are the values and messages important to you and your family and then to communicate these to your child. Do you want to stress abstinence only? Or do you want to also include a message on protection? This will not only depend on your values but also take into account the environment your child is exposed to and the kind of questions he or she may have. Whatever you decide, it’s important to give your child the information and support to make good decisions. This way, there’s a higher chance that your child does not engage in risky sexual behaviour.
It is perfectly okay to tell your child that his question is complex and that you don’t have the answer. Perhaps you can suggest that you and your child read up or discuss it and arrive at a mutually acceptable position.

**Can someone else do the talking for you?**

It is best if you do the talking yourself. If for whatever reason you are not able to do so, ensure that the person you have picked to talk to your child shares the same values and objectives as you do. Teenagers need consistency as much as young children so the messages have to be the same.

**Can you just get a book for them and not talk about it?**

Experts in Singapore say that it has become common to hear both boys and girls say that having sex is not a big deal anymore. They say kids are teased for being virgins and it is “cool” to have sexual experience. So there is a chance your teen will consider having sex. Your child could get lots of information from a book or the internet but these cannot communicate your values to him/her - only you can.

*It’s important to give your child the information and support to make good decisions.*
**CHANGES**

**What you want to achieve**

A child who is healthy and aware of what is happening to his or her body and how to take care of it.

Your little baby has grown up and is beginning to resemble a young man or woman. However, there is no magic age to start a talk on sex. You might start as early as when your child is a toddler to begin teaching about body parts. The actual talk about where and how babies are made probably takes place at a later age when your child gets more curious, seeks to better understand the world around him and starts asking questions.

Puberty, the move from boy to man and girl to woman, can be filled with anxiety and doubt as it is accompanied by several physical and psychological changes. As parents, we can help make this transition as smooth as possible for our children. Get a good book and go through it together. Or take some time out to talk about “becoming a man or woman”. Tackle the physical parts with honesty and simplicity.
Sexual organs mature
At about 11 – 14 years of age, special hormone signals "wake" the previously dormant testicles which then start to enlarge, getting ready to produce testosterone and eventually, sperm. The rest of the changes then slowly begin to appear. Testosterone also exists in girls but boys have much more of it.

As puberty begins, your son may find that he wakes up with erections and sometimes he will have ejaculated too (wet dreams) – this is usually a signal that the change from boyhood to manhood has begun.

Hair and body growth
When the hormones start their production, your son will start to sprout hair on his face, chest, arms, legs, and in the pubic area. Initially, the hair that grows is fine hair; by 18, he will have his full set of thicker hair. He will also grow bigger and stronger, with his arms, legs and shoulders becoming broader. His penis is also growing and this may be a cause of concern especially if he compares sizes with friends in the restroom!

You may notice that your pubertal boy is also beginning to smell – puberty can cause the sweat glands in the skin to work more resulting in stronger body odours. Pimples also start to show and can be a source of concern to him.

Voice breaks
Testosterone makes your son’s vocal chords thicker and longer and this is why his voice changes too. This change doesn’t happen overnight and it takes a few years. In the meantime, his voice might "pop" or "crack". By about 15, his voice will become permanently lower.
Some common questions

“When do I grow hair under my armpits and private parts and why?”

What you can say
Each boy has a different time when his hormones wake up and start working. Usually, a boy will have hair appearing under his arms, on his face and in the area around his penis. This hair is like a signboard that nature places on our bodies to announce the start of puberty. Hair helps to protect the body and regulates body temperature. It also catches the normal “scent” produced in sweat, which can attract or repel others.

What you can do
This is a good time to talk about taking showers and using deodorant, and teach him about shaving and grooming. Do not tease your son about his hair growth as it can be embarrassing.

“What are wet dreams and why do they happen? It is so embarrassing!”

What you can say
At puberty, boys start producing sperm and semen (a white, sticky fluid that nourishes the sperms) and this may flow out of the penis during sleep. This can happen for no real reason or when having an exciting or sexy dream, and is referred to as a wet dream. It is perfectly natural and is the body's way of keeping the reproductive organs in good working condition. Most boys start having wet dreams when they are between 12 and 14 years old. And no, nothing is wrong if you don't have them by that age either!

What you can do
A child who doesn't know what this is might get a shock of his life when it happens for the very first time and be terribly embarrassed. So never make fun of it or brush it aside. Encourage your child to ask questions if he is still not sure. If you do not have a reliable male to have this talk, ask a teacher or a friend who can talk to your son. Boys may also open up to their dads if they can share their own experiences with honesty and a bit of humour.
Physical changes
In girls, sex hormones (particularly progesterone and oestrogen) bring about significant physical changes at puberty. At about age 11 or 12, sometimes even younger, a girl will start to notice her breasts growing, her hips becoming wider and her body, curvier.

She will also start putting on weight and usually has a bigger appetite. It is important to explain to pubertal girls that this is a normal process and that unhealthy dieting can prevent her body from doing what it is supposed to do.

Pimples may show up as well.

Just before a girl gets her period, she is likely to see some sticky, pale yellowish mucus in her underwear. Again, this is perfectly normal and a sign that things are moving along just fine.

Menstruation
It is important to speak to your daughter about menstruation before she actually gets her period. For a girl who does not know about it, it can be a terrifying experience! So start by explaining simply that it is a very natural process and every girl in the world (including their favourite pop star) gets it and it is a normal part of growing up. You may consider getting a well-illustrated book to explain the basics and then talk about being clean, using a pad and the feelings of cramps, sore breasts or bloatedness and how these can be overcome with a good diet and regular exercise.

Hair
About six months after breasts start to develop your girl will start to grow hair around her genital and underarm areas. As with boys, this can result in stronger body odour so do talk about regular showers and the use of deodorants if necessary.
Some common questions

“My friends have already started growing breasts and I am still so flat. The boys tease me, what can I do?”

What you can say
Breast growth is a sign of puberty but it doesn’t start and end at a specific age – some girls start as young as 9 years old, others at 14 and some may not finish growing until a later age. So tell your friends you have a long way to go! A girl’s breast size is not the only criteria for attractiveness. Women who have a good sense of humour, are caring and make great friends are beautiful too!

What you can do
Help your child gain confidence in other ways. For example, help her choose clothes that enhance her figure. Teach her how she can draw attention to other features such as her hair or eyes. Highlight to her that many of the pictures of models she sees in the media are touched up to look as if they have bigger breasts.

“I am frightened about having my period. Does it mean I can’t do PE or play sports?”

What you can say
Seeing blood in your underwear can be very frightening but think of it this way: girls get periods because their bodies are working exactly as they are meant to. Just as you urinate or pass motion, menstruation is the monthly “maintenance” which takes place in your reproductive organs. Every single girl in the world gets her periods.

The beginning is usually the toughest and if you do experience cramps, bloating, headaches, fatigue or pre-menstrual tension, these usually become more manageable and in many cases, disappear. You can do PE or play sports during your period. The more active you are, the better you will feel when your period comes. Exercise is known to help with cramps and all the other not-so-nice stuff that often comes with having periods.

What you can do
Go with her to the library to look for information on menstruation and how to deal with it or search on the internet together. Show her what a sanitary pad looks like and how it can be used. Encourage her to eat well (good nutritious food helps) and get regular exercise. Show her how to enjoy and embrace her unique qualities and give her privacy.
There are psychological changes too!

During adolescence, self-esteem may decrease. Young teenagers are searching for their unique identity and are extra conscious about how they look or where they belong. And when there are family conflicts, their dependence on peers increases. According to psychologists, the need to conform peaks at about 12 to 14 years of age. This motivates young people to do things just to fit in.

Hormonal changes can cause mood swings, so expect your child to be easily irritated. It is also a time when he/she may be feeling awkward, self-conscious and embarrassed about looks; he/she wants to be attractive to the opposite sex. Problems like pimples can make him/her feel worse about how he/she looks, so advice on skincare will be helpful.

There may also be a tendency for your child to be more emotional and want more privacy. Be understanding of the need for privacy, but also offer your child some good avenues to release those pent up emotions, e.g. participation in sports, helping those who are less fortunate or other community activities.
Important tips

Get the terms right
Use correct terms and not "baby talk". This will help your child get comfortable with his or her body. More importantly, this sets the stage for later. If your child is familiar with sexual organs and terms, it becomes a little easier to talk about puberty, sex and dating.

Pay attention to what's going on
The changes associated with puberty start as young as 8 or 9 years old when the brain sends important signals to the body that it is time for the reproductive system to wake up and get ready for its work in the future. While puberty makes its announcement very clearly in girls (when they get their period), there is less of a big bang in boys. Generally, girls start changing at about 9 years of age and boys at about 11 to 13 years. For both sexes, besides talking, it may be a good idea to get a book that explains these changes in a simple and easy-to-digest manner. If your child prefers to read it on his/her own, let him/her know you are there to answer any questions.

Boost self-esteem
Boost your child's self-esteem through encouragement and praise. Emphasise his/her strengths. Tell your child to be proud of who he/she is.

Be there
Constantly reassure your child that he/she should respect and care for his/her body (by eating well, being hygienic and not smoking or drinking). Assure him/her that his/her looks are a work-in-progress! Some children are not prepared for the changes and feel very isolated and awkward, so always be there for your child, while giving him/her enough privacy.

Teach about "good touch", "bad touch"
Tell your child it is usually ok to be hugged and kissed by people whom he/she knows and loves. However, if it is a situation where your child feels uncomfortable, is told not to tell anyone else about it or forced to touch another person, teach him/her to:

- Say no! Tell the person that you don't like it and you don't want to be touched.
- Get away fast and never stay alone with that person ever again.
- Call or scream for help.
- Inform someone you trust e.g. mum or a teacher
Acknowledge feelings

Puberty also signifies the awakening of sexual urges. Therefore recognise that it is normal for your child to start becoming attracted to the opposite sex. (Indeed, some young people may be attracted to the same sex.) Avoid reprimanding your child for having these feelings. Instead, encourage him/her to talk about these feelings with you. Do not be quick to judge and really listen to what your child has to say or you might find him/her clamming up and refusing to talk to you anymore on these issues. Share with your child about similar feelings you might have had during your teen years.

Use humour

Humour is a great way to tackle “growing pains”. True, this is a serious topic, but lighten it by using humour appropriately. Your child will probably feel that he/she can talk to you about sexuality if you are not uptight about it yourself.
CHALLENGES

What you want to achieve
A teen who is aware of the pressures and can handle them in a safe way.
A teen who understands that sex is not just physical but entails responsibilities.

A challenge wouldn’t be called a challenge if it was easy to deal with. Besides the pubertal changes and awakening sexual urges, your growing teen is seeking and establishing what his/her unique identity should be. He/she is likely to have confusing emotions and conflicting values from family, peers and the media. Questions abound though he/she may not ask you. The challenge for parents is that it isn’t only about the facts of sex. It is about instilling the right values and teaching your child how to manage this roller-coaster ride.

Be prepared that views may differ between you and your child. Avoid being judgmental and listen to what your child has to say. If you do not agree with your child’s views, let him/her know why without losing your temper. Try to understand why your child holds such a view.

It’s about looks

Both sexes become interested and anxious about how they look. Girls are sensitive about their breast size, boys worry about their penis size. Both may struggle with the idea of what it means to be beautiful or handsome. Kids are bombarded with pictures of “beautiful” people so take the time to explain that a person’s looks are just ONE part of what makes them special. A good-looking person may be popular but it is the brilliant scientist who cures diseases and makes a real difference in the world! Praise your child for his/her talents and encourage him/her to see the beauty in everyone. Never put undue pressure on your child to look a certain way (e.g. to lose weight or to be more macho).

It’s about friends

Belonging becomes super-important. There can be pressure to have a boyfriend or girlfriend at this age. You can start by acknowledging how real such pressures are and how hard it is for your teen to fight them. So, start by talking about respect, not only for his/her body and what he/she does with it, but also that of another’s. Stress that no one should do what they are uncomfortable with. While they may end up pleasing others, they have let themselves down. Talk about your own experiences; you’ll be amazed at how much your child wants to know about what you went through.
It's about exploring
This is a time when your child is discovering his/her body, having desires and perhaps even experimenting with sexual activities – it is both the developing mind and body at work. Your task is to try and manage these in a healthy and wise way and not to yell, scream or be authoritarian. Encourage questions and provide opportunities to pursue other interests like sports or community service and group outings, preferably supervised or chaperoned by adults.

Take masturbation (stroking or rubbing the private parts) for example. If your child asks you about it or you catch him/her doing it, do not make him/her feel guilty. Health experts say there is no evidence to show that masturbation is harmful; it is a natural process of finding out about the genital organs and how they work. However, let your child know that if it is done too often or he/she thinks about it all the time, it can become an obsession.

It's about love
Teens always get caught up in the first throes of love. For them, it can be so powerful, nothing else seems to really matter. So one of your conversations with your teen should be about love and what it is. How the first part of love is like the first layer of lasagna – it is the best looking part of the dish. As all sorts of chemicals are released, the first rush of love makes this phase possibly the most intoxicating. But, this phase doesn’t last (it would be very tiring for everyone if it did). The first layer gives way to a deeper, more fulfilling second, third and fourth layers made up of trust, support, true friendship and companion love. And this often takes years to develop. So if your teen wants to be in a “steady” relationship, take the trouble to talk about love. And get to know the girlfriend or boyfriend. Some parents find this process quite interesting!

The challenge for parents is that it isn’t only about the facts of sex. It is also about instilling the right values and teaching your child how to manage this roller-coaster ride.
It's about possible same sex crushes

Same sex crushes are something that might crop up with your teen, particularly if he/she goes to a single-sex school. It is normal and part of puberty and sexual attraction. However, your teen can be quite confused as to whether he/she is gay. Most teens will move out of this phase and find perfectly fulfilling relationships later on. Provide your child with opportunities to interact with a variety of friends and acquaintances. If this issue persists beyond your teen’s early years, it is important to have an honest talk about his or her sexual orientation. While scientists do not know why someone becomes homosexual, there is research to suggest that there are biological factors in place. Even so, this is a delicate and very challenging issue and needs to be addressed with sensitivity.

Once you have taken note of the above issues, common to both genders, you’ll be more ready to address the challenging questions below that can surface.

Boys

“My friend told me about dirty pictures online. I took a look and I like looking at them - is what I am doing very bad?”

What you can say

“Dirty pictures” or pornography refers to any publication (e.g. a book, film, picture, magazine, website, etc) which shows sexual behaviour and is intended to cause sexual excitement. It can be exciting to see such pictures, because you are discovering so many interesting things about men’s and women’s bodies, so it is not “bad” to want to look at them. But very often, these pictures depict sex in a wrong way - you must understand that these are just people acting or posing this way for money.

Also, if you download or get pornographic pictures, you can get into trouble with the law because it is illegal. And watching or reading too much pornography is not healthy for your mind or body and can lead to addiction. Most importantly, pornography can give you wrong ideas about sex and women, and does not teach you how to treat girls with charm and respect.
What you can do

Accept that porn is part of life and don’t blindfold your teens – he probably knows a lot more than you do, given how tech-savvy he is! Avoid scolding or yelling at your teen for looking at sexy pictures as it is a normal part of growing up. But don’t adopt a lax attitude either. When teens look at pornography, they may develop unrealistic ideas especially about women (viewing them as sexual objects) and sex (that it is not a union between two loving adults but an activity purely for pleasure). Stress to your child that pornography does not teach one to improve the social skills that attract the opposite sex in the first place.

These days, children have a high chance of seeing porn online as a result of pop-ups or spam. So supervise your child when he uses the computer. You can also install software on the home computer to block or limit such pop-ups and spam.
“My friends think it’s ok to start dating at age 14. When can I start?”

What you can say
First, ask “Why do you want to date?” For boys, sometimes there is pressure to show off and keep score by having girlfriends and thinking they have to indulge in some sort of sexual play. But dating should not be a ticket to have sex. Girls like to be respected and they will appreciate you more if you act in a responsible way that takes into account their well-being. Yes, of course you should go out with girls - in groups with friends. If you like a girl, take time to get to know her and build a good relationship first. Group dates are an excellent way of doing this because there is less pressure and you can also see how the girl you like mixes and behaves with others.

What you can do
For teens, dating often just means a chance to act like an adult, go for a movie or a meal and perhaps be romanced. So don’t assume dating means your son wants to have sex. Make it clear what your rules are. When your son wants to go on a date, make sure you know who he is going out with, where he will be and what time he will be back. Better yet, invite his friends over for pizza and movies.

“I really love my girlfriend and I want to have sex with her. But I don’t know where and how to start.”

What you can say
Having sex is a very big decision that involves feelings and responsibility so it is not something you should just jump in and do. When you are in love, you might think it is natural to have sex with that person – after all, this is what you see on TV and in the movies. The truth is love comes in different stages – after the excitement of the first phase, you settle into the next phase where you discover each other’s good and bad parts. This is when you find out if you really do love that person and this takes time, usually a year or two, often more!

It is very normal to love someone and have sexual feelings about them but sex is not the only way to show you love someone. You may think you are ready for sex, but what about your girlfriend? Do you trust and care for her enough to respect her wishes? Are you prepared for unwanted pregnancy or possible infections? Would you be breaking the law even if she does consent to sex? What happens if you fall out of love and break up?

Remember that sex and love are very different things. Love involves respect, honesty, trust, true friendship and good communication. You can love someone very much and not have sex with them; indeed, sex should be the very last thing you get to in a good relationship. In the meantime, you can go for walks with your girlfriend, hold her hand and hug her to show her she is special.
What you can do
Recognise that your teenage son has raging hormones and it can be difficult for him to keep check on his desires. So avoid talking down to him. Instead, discuss the matter and really listen to what he has to say. Suggest safe ways to manage desires e.g. by holding hands or hugging. Provide opportunities like family outings where they can be together without the temptation of sex.

“All my friends say they have had sex with their girlfriends. They tease me about being nerdy.”

What you can say
Unless you are with your friends 24 hours a day, there is no way of telling if they are having sex as much as they say they do! Sometimes, to fit in, boys lie about having sex. The truth is, many don’t. There are those who do go all the way and regret it, wishing they had waited, though they might not say this aloud. If they are having sex because they are under pressure, they want to fit in, they want to be seen as being “macho” or they are just curious, these are all the wrong reasons. It is not just a question of pleasure, but an emotional decision too. It is also a legal issue – you will be breaking the law if you have sex with a girl below 16 years of age. You don’t need to be ashamed of teasing, especially since you are charming / funny / smart / caring / honest and responsible – all the things that make you very attractive to girls! Most girls look for these qualities first.

What you can do
Your son needs a boost to his self-esteem so encouragement and praise will go a long way. Help him to explore other interests so he can learn more about his strengths and be kept well-occupied too!

“All my girlfriends are dating. Why can’t I?”

What you can say
I know that you want to start dating. Why not go out on group dates instead? As a parent, I am concerned about you going out on single dates. It’s not that I do not trust you, it’s just that I am worried that you might be harmed. Girls are more vulnerable to sexual predators and there is always the risk of getting pregnant or sexually transmitted infections.
What you can do

Girls do want to date just as much as boys and they too learn the art of communicating with the opposite sex when they date safely. Don’t assume that dates mean sexual activity. The more overprotective and rigid you are, the more likely your daughter will rebel. Make it clear to your teen girl what the rules are and more importantly, why you have them in place - precisely because she is a young girl and you are looking to protect her from harm. If you decide to let her go on a single date, make sure she stays contactable and talk to her about being in uncomfortable situations and how to say no if she doesn’t like what she is getting herself into. Make it a point to meet the boy she is dating and get to know him. Here again, consider using family outings as a way for them to spend time. But do recognise that you must also give her privacy, an important step to gaining her trust.

“Is it painful when you have sex?”

What you can say

All girls are born with something called the hymen which is a thin tissue that stretches across part of the opening of the vagina. Some girls are born with more hymen tissue than others. And sometimes, the hymen is stretched open for the very first time when a penis enters the vagina during sexual intercourse. This might cause pain and there might be some bleeding. But a hymen can also be stretched during sports or from wearing tampons too.
What you can do
Avoid using pain as a way to deter your daughter from having sex – this can backfire in the long run and affect intimate relations. If comfortable, share with your daughter your own sexual experience with your spouse. You can also use a book or go on the internet to discuss about how a woman’s body functions and what steps can be taken to reduce possible pain during sex.

“What does sex feel like? My friends say it is fun and I am curious.”

What you can say
How it feels really depends on whether you were ready for it and who you are having sex with. Your friends might say it is fun because they heard it from others and aren’t really sure what it means. Oftentimes, teenage girls who engage in early sex end up feeling hurt, rejected or used. So while you can talk and learn as much as you want about sex, be wise about actually having sex because it can affect your future and your goals.

What you can do
Recognise that your daughter is growing up in an era where “sex is no big deal”, though your own values may differ. Acknowledge that sex can feel wonderful, but more so in the context of marriage. Spend some time talking to her about your own values and why you have them. Use news articles, magazine stories and movies to talk about how pre-marital sex is often painted as a rosy picture but that the reality can be quite different. You might even wish to talk to her about protection.

“My boyfriend says that he loves me and if I love him too I will have sex with him. I am afraid that he will break up with me if I don’t.”

What you can say
Sometimes girls think that by having sex with their boyfriends, they will keep them happy. In fact, something isn’t quite right if your boyfriend who should love and respect you, uses “love” to get sex. Explain to him that sex is a big decision for you and you are not ready or prepared for it. Tell him that you feel pressured and that is not a good reason to have sex. Girls who have sex to please others end up feeling very vulnerable and can get very hurt when the relationship doesn’t last.

What you can do
Recognise that your daughter probably thinks that her boyfriend is the world to her and that she cannot bear a break-up. You or your spouse should share your own experience or that of people you know. Be supportive, should her boyfriend break-up with her. Remind her that she has many good qualities and that she will find someone who respects her and her decisions. Most parents will not be okay about their teenage daughter having pre-marital sex, but do consider also talking to her about protecting herself.
CONSEQUENCES

What you want to achieve
To make sure your child is fully aware of the risks and dangers and knows the consequences of unprotected sex.

As parents, we sometimes forget what we were like during our teen years. We might have felt we were in love and that it would last forever. Your teenage child might be feeling this way too about someone. Unfortunately, your child might also think that having sex with that special someone is normal, to show his/her love.

Young people may be aware of the consequences of unprotected pre-marital sex – the problem is they might also think “it will not happen to me”. It is important to highlight to them these consequences, especially in the light of increasing rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in young people. Among Singapore youths aged 10 - 19 years, the number of new STI cases reached 775 in the year 2006, three times more than the 238 new cases in 2002.
In this section, we provide tips on talking about consequences of pre-marital sex with your child. We also address how to handle the situation if your child does end up having to face these consequences, along with details on STIs. We hope that your awareness of these infections and how they can affect your teenager will then translate into a good discussion.

A good time to bring up these issues would be when your teenager is about 13 or 14 years old but you know your child best to decide when to do this.

Young people may be aware of the consequences of unprotected pre-marital sex – the problem is they might also think “it will not happen to me”.

When talking about consequences...

Go easy on the scary talk
It is tempting to just trot out the scary facts in the hope that your child won’t have sex at all but this is not a good strategy. You don’t want your child to associate sex with awful diseases and become handicapped when it is indeed time for him/her to have healthy relationships! Give your child the idea that some nasty things can and do happen and these can be uncomfortable at best and deadly at worst. Make it casual and general without too many details that can overwhelm. Involve your child in a discussion (it shouldn’t be a one-way lecture). Media stories of real-life incidents can be a good way to get the discussion going.

As a parent, you should be aware of the following information. You can then decide how you might surface it to your teen without the scare tactics.

- Movies, romance novels and television shows often depict love and sex as one and the same thing. They seldom show the flip side of pre-marital sex, nor surface the issue of protection.

- While the pill might prevent unwanted pregnancy, it will not protect against STIs. A condom, if used correctly, can help protect against both pregnancy and some STIs, including the deadly HIV. However, it might not protect against STIs like herpes and genital warts. In addition, a condom can “fail” if it has expired, is not stored properly prior to use or it is not put on correctly and consistently.

- It is illegal for a boy to have sex with a girl who is under the age of 16 years, even if she agrees to it. If the girl is below 14 years of age, the boy can be charged with rape. Punishment for these offences can include a jail term of up to 20 years, hefty fines and caning.
Go beyond the facts and figures
Do talk about relationships too – that good relationships involve responsibility, care and concern; that unlike in movies where people jump into bed with each other, in real life, people need to take time to get to know each other and connect emotionally too; that sex should not be the first thing to happen in a loving relationship but the last.

Go for praise
Praise your child for all the things that he/she does right. A child who has a strong self-esteem, who is self-assured and knows what is right and wrong is better able to withstand the pressure to have sex too early.

Go for the middle ground
It is tough to expect a teenager with raging hormones to reign in all his or her desires. Accept that having a "steady" girlfriend or boyfriend is a natural extension of that. Help your child manage his/her desires as follows:

- Set boundaries for physical intimacy e.g. holding hands and hugging is ok but no deep kissing or petting. Do highlight that kissing, although tempting, can lead to greater physical intimacy.

- Avoid going to each others' homes when there is no one else there. Also avoid going alone to deserted places such as parks, void decks, staircases, etc.

- Teach your child ways to say "No" and walk away from situations that he or she may feel uncomfortable in.

- Encourage group outings and involve your child’s "steady" in your family activities whenever possible without stifling them – this way you'll have them under your safe eye!
Pregnancy

When your daughter comes to you and says, “I’m pregnant”, it would probably seem like you are in a living nightmare. That is if you are kept informed and she turns to you for help! Girls who end up pregnant might get abortions on the quiet and no one would know any better. This is why it is important to establish an open relationship early on and to have discussed the topic of pregnancy. Here are some basic pointers about talking to your child about pregnancy (and yes, boys are included in this talk too!)

- Take the chance to do it when you are discussing pubertal changes. For girls, when talking about menstruation, bring in the topic of pregnancy. Stress that the human body is created to reproduce and it will do all it can to make babies!

- Teens would have lots of questions about pregnancy. Try to answer these in as neutral a manner as possible. It is fine to be embarrassed and it is not a crime to admit you are uncomfortable; that might be the first step to better communication!

- Depending on your own values, you might want to talk about precautions and how they work (like the use of condoms and other contraceptives). Studies have shown that when parents talk about protection against unwanted pregnancy or STIs, the likelihood of their child either delaying sex or practising safer sex increases. A teenager who is aware and informed has a higher chance of being safe.

What if your child gets pregnant?

While it is impossible not to be shocked, hurt, angry or disappointed, it is not the wisest thing to send your daughter out onto the streets or say that you will have nothing to do with her pregnancy. It is perfectly understandable if you are unable to handle these emotions so do turn to people who can help. You need a steady helping hand as much as your daughter needs you. And believe it, she does need you – she is probably terrified, though she may not show this upfront.

How you decide to deal with your daughter’s pregnancy depends a lot on your circumstances and what is right for her and your family. Calmly discuss all options with her such as keeping or aborting the pregnancy – she needs to be clear about all possible consequences. Do not be shy to seek professional help, for example, from a counsellor, if necessary. Be aware that if your daughter is under 16 years of age, she will be required to go for pre-abortion counseling, should you both decide to go that route.

If your son gets a girl pregnant, do not simply sit back and do nothing. Try as much as possible to help the girl and her family and highlight to your son that he must take responsibility for the situation. This could include being punished by the law.
Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

When people have sex, bacteria and viruses can pass between them. Semen, vaginal fluid and in some cases, blood, are perfect agents to carry these from one person to another. As a parent, here are some key things you need to know about STIs:

- It is possible to be infected without having obvious signs or symptoms. People with Chlamydia or HIV may not even realize they are infected and can in turn unknowingly infect others through sexual contact.

- Infection does not just happen with regular sexual contact (vaginal or anal) but also with other "sexual activities" such as oral sex and the use of sexual aids like vibrators. In some cases, even kissing an infected person spells trouble.

- STIs caused by bacteria are usually treatable with antibiotics or other medication. However, those caused by viruses like HIV have no cure.

- It is important to have a STI detected early so treatment can start as soon as possible. Even in the case of the deadly HIV virus, early detection and treatment can prolong life. So if you suspect your child is at risk, get him/her checked early by a doctor.

More information on STIs is provided in the table below.

Common STIs in Singapore

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STI</th>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Symptoms (may vary from person to person)</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GENITAL HERPES</td>
<td>Spread by Herpes Simplex Virus Type 2, via close skin contact including unprotected and oral sex.</td>
<td>Symptoms appear 3-10 days after contact. Blisters on the genitals, buttocks or upper thighs which usually burst and scab over leaving sore ulcers, painful urination, swollen glands. Often mistaken for an ingrown hair, pimple, bug bite, jock itch, yeast infection, zipper/razor burn, abrasions from rough sex soreness/irritation.</td>
<td>No cure. Medicated cream, antiviral tablets, saline baths for pain relief. Prone to recurrence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GENITAL WARTS</td>
<td>Spread by Human Papiloma Virus via close skin contact usually during unprotected sex.</td>
<td>Visible warts / pink cauliflower-like growth in single or multiple clusters on sex organs and/or anus. May itch. Can increase the risk of genital cancers eg cervical cancer</td>
<td>No cure. Small warts can be removed with nitrogen (freezing), diathermy (heat) or a chemical paint. Tend to recur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STI</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| CHLAMYDIA | Common STI caused by a bacteria. Can also be spread from genitals to the eyes via fingers. Can affect the penis, cervix, urethra, fallopian tubes, anus, rectum and less commonly the throat and eyes. | There may be no symptoms or symptoms may not show for years. Symptoms when they appear include:  
Women: Unusual vaginal discharge, pain in the lower abdomen, during sex and when urinating, bleeding after sex or between menses  
Men: Discharge from tip of penis, pain when urinating and/or pain/swelling of testicles if left untreated. | Antibiotics. If left untreated in women it can result in pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) which can lead to:  
• chronic pain  
• a higher risk of pregnancy in the fallopian tube  
• infertility |
| GONORRHOEA | Sexually transmitted bacterial infection of the genitals, throat or rectum. | Symptoms appear 3–5 days after contact. Many have no/mild symptoms.  
Women: Yellow or green vaginal discharge, pain during sex and in abdomen, burning during urination.  
Men: Yellow discharge from penis, irritation/discharge from anus, pain in the testicles or when urinating. | Antibiotics. If untreated, may lead to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) in women or even infertility in both sexes. |
| HEPATITIS B | A sexually transmitted viral infection that affects the liver, very common in Africa, Asia, South America. | Can have no symptoms. Symptoms if any, may appear 4 weeks to 6 months after contact. Flu-like symptoms, fever, dark urine, pale stool, loss of appetite, night sweats, whites of eyes and skin may go yellow indicating jaundice. | Most infected people become carriers for life with long term medical supervision required. Immunisation available for prevention. |
| HIV/AIDS | Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is transmitted via sex or blood i.e. transfusions, needles. Leads to AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). | Many have no symptoms for several years. No symptoms in early stages. Prolonged fever, fatigue and night sweats, swollen glands, diarrhoea, rash, mouth ulcers) between one and six weeks after infection, lasting a few days to a few weeks. | No cure. Possible prolongation of life via combination of antiviral therapy, which attacks HIV directly. If left untreated, AIDS can develop within 8 – 10 years, leading to death. |
| SYPHILIS | Caused by a sexually transmitted bacterial infection. If left untreated can result in very serious complications (including damage to the heart, brain and spinal cord). | Primary Stage (10 – 90 days after contact): Painless sore on sex organs, lips or tongue  
Secondary Stage (2 – 6 months after contact): Non-itchy skin rash, white patches in the mouth, throat or groin, patchy hair loss  
Tertiary Stage (3 – 25 years after contact): Paralysis, blindness, insanity, heart disease, bone/joint deformity | Curable at Primary and Secondary stage with antibiotic injections. No cure at Tertiary Stage. |
PARENTS, YOU CAN DO IT!

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

It may not be easy for some of us to start talking to our children about sexuality issues. However, the more you start talking to your child, the more confident you will get.

This guide and the resources below may not help you deal with every situation or handle every question where sex and your child are concerned. But they will certainly help you get started. Examine your own values and beliefs first, as well as talk to your spouse to come to a common ground. Your child needs your guidance when it comes to sexuality issues, even though he or she may not openly say it.

Helplines

HealthLine: 1800-223-1313
This toll-free information service by Health Promotion Board is available in 4 languages during office hours (Monday to Friday: 8.30am – 5.00pm; Saturdays: 8.30am – 1.00pm). Besides general health issues, you can speak with trained personnel about sexuality issues pertaining to your child.

National FSC (Family Service Centre)
Helpline: 1800-838-0100
The National FSC Helpline is a toll-free telephone number that links all FSCs. It operates in English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. Parents requesting for counseling help on sexuality issues can dial this number and key in the first three digits of your telephone number to be connected to the FSC nearest your home.

Useful websites

- www.letstalkaboutsex.sg/parents
- www.family.gov.sg
- www.sexualityandu.ca
- www.kidshealth.org
- www.advocatesforyouth.org