



Talking to your teenager about... contraception

Do I? Don't I? Do they know enough? Could they know too much? Is it too soon? Or too late? Parents have even more dilemmas than their teens when it comes to discussing contraception.

Getting started on sex

Knowing how to talk to your teenager about contraception is an awkward moment for many parents. You want to be cool about it, but you feel strangely ancient. You want to be relaxed and open, but you're suddenly on high alert for any clue about their sex life... although you don't really want to know the details either. It's enough to put you off even before you start.

But if you feel uncomfortable about it, you can bet your teenager does too, whether they show it by being offhand, flippant, giggly or even moodier than usual. So it's up to you to set the tone, by being relaxed and open to discussion, rather than launching into a lecture or avoiding the issue altogether.

Keep the communication channels open

Of course, it's unlikely that you'll have a full and frank discussion all in one go, or at a conveniently planned time. Sometimes, it's easier just to seize the moment when the issue arises – on TV, in the paper, in a letter from school.

Whether it's a chance opportunity, or a well-rehearsed scene, perhaps the easiest starting point is to ask what they know already. It will give them a chance to show off their knowledge and you a chance to collect your thoughts. What's more, you might be surprised how much they have already learned at school.

A changing curriculum

In the classroom, reproduction and conception are a statutory part of the Science curriculum at key stage 3 for 11 to 14 year olds. More detailed sex and relationship education is already an element of Personal Social & Health Education (PSHE) in key stage 4 for 14 to 16 year olds¹.

By 2010, the new PSHE curriculum will ensure that sex and relationships education is compulsory in all schools, meaning children will learn about contraception and abortion from the age of 11².

The value of parental advice

So why, you might ask, do I need to have conversations about contraception with my teenager at all? Well, it's your call and as a parent, no doubt you'll trust your own instincts. But you may want to consider the following:

- Over a quarter of young people aged under 16 are sexually active but this is the group least likely to use contraception, including condoms
- Young people whose parents discuss sex and relationships openly and without embarrassment, have sex later and are more likely to use contraception
- Eighty six percent of parents feel strongly that there would be fewer teenage pregnancies if more parents talked to their children about sex and relationship.
- Nearly half of young people say they receive no or little information from their parents.

Best Practice Sexual Health Guidelines – under 16s PDF³

Pregnancy and STD rates

You might be surprised to know that teenage pregnancy rates are actually rising again for the first time in a decade. According to The Office for National Statistics, under-18 pregnancies in England and Wales rose by at least 2.7 percent in 2007, with up to 42 in every 1,000 girls becoming pregnant in the 12 months to September 2007⁴. That means teenage girls under the age of 18 have on average more than a one in 25 chance of becoming pregnant. And that's not all...

According to Avert, an international Aids charity, "Over the past decade there has been a substantial increase in diagnoses of most Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) in the UK, and reports of two of the most common STDs have shown massive rises. Cases of uncomplicated gonorrhoea increased by 42% between 1998 and 2007, while genital chlamydia increased by 150%⁵."

Avert goes on to say that "Between April 2005 and March 2006, the NCSP found a chlamydia prevalence of 10.2% among women under 25 years old, and 10.1% among men in the same age group." It's not a trend you want your kid to be part of.

Talking to your teenager

Ok so let's assume that you're now keen to talk to your teenager about contraception. You've asked them what they already know. They've enjoyed the chance to shock you with their casual grasp of (or ignorance of) the subject. So you want to make sure they really understand that the supposedly hilarious sex ed lessons in school are directly relevant to their own lives, the choices they make and the risks they may be taking.

Getting the message across

Perhaps one of the most important and fundamental points to get across is that each person is individually responsible for contraception. Teenagers can be scarily mature in some respects, while in others they remain as childish and self-centred as when they were eight.

“It was *his* job to wear the condom, it’s not *my* fault” is one of those arguments you just don’t want to be having with your sulky teenage girl. Conversely, hearing your teenage son declare, “Well it’s not me who gets pregnant, so it’s not my problem,” is enough to strike a chill into any parent’s heart.

Types of contraception to discuss

A second and equally important point is to explain to your teenager the difference between contraception that’s effective in preventing pregnancies and contraception that protects against sexually transmitted diseases.

A hormonal contraceptive may be the safest method of protecting a teenage girl against pregnancy⁶. But a condom is the only contraceptive considered highly effective in reducing the risk of STDs such as Chlamydia and HPV (which can cause genital warts and cervical cancer) as well as Herpes, Gonorrhoea, Syphilis, Hepatitis and HIV⁷.

It’s also worth suggesting (perhaps with a bit of humour) a ‘belts and braces’ approach to your teenager’s contraception i.e. the male using a condom to protect against STDs and the female using a hormonal contraceptive (a pill, injection, patch or implant).

Being realistic about risks

While it may seem over cautious, it’s worth remembering that the male condom is considered to be about 98 percent effective when used perfectly correctly⁶. But how many novice condom users are likely to achieve ‘perfect use’?

According to the *Pearl Index*, which reports the effectiveness of birth control methods, ‘typical use’ of a condom has only an 85 percent success rate in preventing pregnancy in the first year of use⁶. Suddenly it doesn’t seem so silly suggesting that both partners take precautions after all...

Getting the timing right

Of course, exactly what you impart to your teenagers will be down to your own values, morals and feelings about the subject. However it’s clear that teenagers *do* want advice on sex and contraception from their parents – and that the ideal time to discuss this is from 11 to 14.

A report by agony aunt, Anita Naik published in 2008 offers real reassurance about just how important your role as a parent is at this sensitive time:

“The essential time for talking about sex and relationships is 11-14 years. This is the age when teens are most receptive to advice and parental guidance about sex and relationships. This will inform their ability to make measured and responsible decisions throughout their teens and into adult life...

“British teens are eager to talk – 75% of 11 – 14 year olds want, but currently find it difficult, to talk about sex and relationships with their parents. A resounding 99% feel talking wouldn't encourage them to have sex as many parents fear. Despite this, over half of parents (55%) hold back due to embarrassment because they don't know how to start.”

‘Everyday Conversations, Every Day’, June 2008, commissioned by Department for Children, Schools and Families⁸.

Isn't it time that, as parents, we overcame those fears and simply found somewhere, some time, to start that conversation with our teenagers?

For more useful information on contraception please visit www.contraception.co.uk.

References:

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6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_birth_control_methods#Comparison_table
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A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

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