

Talking To Your Children About Sexuality

A guide for parents



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Madeline : Just dropped Allan at the mall.
(Mum) Scary, his friends are now taller than me! And they are only 14 years old!

Madeline : They all look 18! Deep voices! I took a picture of them, wait –

Eric (Dad) : Haha! BTW, Jane has been playing games and chatting on IM for 2 hours.

Madeline : With her friends?

Madeline : Or that boy from school?

Eric : She says she's talking with girls from class.

Madeline : Must check okay?

Eric : What? She's just 10! She already has a crush?

Eric : Hmm...I think it's time to give them both "The Talk".

Madeline : I agree. How?

Eric : We have that book on how to talk to kids about sexuality.

Madeline : Most importantly, they have to know they can talk to us.

Eric : Yes. Let's not panic and decide first what to talk to them about.

Madeline : Okay, let's read the book. I don't want to say the wrong thing.



Breathe Mum & Dad, breathe.

Help is here. Think of this booklet as your survival guide to dealing with the most awkward topics to talk to your kids about – sexuality.

Go ask your dad!
Are you going out dressed like that?!
A boyfriend?
Aren't you too young for that?



Are these words familiar? We've all heard them from our parents, and ironically we seem to have been pre-programmed to say the same things to our children. While evasive tactics are instinct to us on this subject matter, you have to consider that when kids of this generation want to know about something – they will find a way. With today's easy and quick access to information, plenty of answers and ideas are available to them, even those that might not be quite right.

Speaking with your kids about sexuality allows you to provide accurate information, and at the same time, gives you a chance to voice out moral values and principles you want your children to understand.

Open discussions will help them cope and recognise their feelings, and hopefully will eventually help in making informed, responsible decisions; understanding the possible consequences of being sexually active – such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

This guide will take you through four areas of concern - Communication, Changes, Challenges and Consequences.

Communication | Tips on how to speak to your child in the way they will listen to you

Changes | An explanation of physical and psychological changes that come with puberty

Challenges | The critical issues both you and your child will encounter during puberty

Consequences | Discusses unwanted and unexpected effects of unprotected sex such as unwanted pregnancy and STIs

Want to know what to say and know what your kids are actually thinking?
Turn the page.

Mum : Oh look! There's a toy sale –

Jane : MUM! I am 10! I'm not a baby anymore!

Mum : You're right. You're a big girl now. Ok, let's buy your shoes. Wow! Your feet are almost as big as mine!

Jane : Ma... do you think I need a bra? All the other girls in class wear them. Even Claire!

Mum : Hmm... am not really sure if you need it yet. But why don't we visit the department store and check?

Jane : Check my size? Extra small. Hahaha.

Mum : Which reminds me, there's something we need to talk about...

Jane : Can we get ice cream first?

Mum : Okay, we'll talk about it later. Oh look! There's your friend, Brian! Why don't you say hello?

Jane : I don't think he likes me.

Mum : I thought you were friends? Didn't he borrow your games yesterday?

Jane : But, he's always teasing me... I don't want to talk about it right now.

Mum : You know you can always tell me if anything is bothering you...right? Especially about boys.

Jane : I know Mom. Don't worry, I don't like any boy – yet.



*It's not just what
you say – it's
how you say it.*

Before anything else, take a minute to ask yourself, am I hearing what my kids – with their raging hormones – are saying or not saying to me?

We are aware that communicating about sexuality to your prepubescent or pubescent child is tricky. And our kids know it, too. It takes both parties to make sense out of anything. It requires a lot of listening – from you. In any case, what we hope you get from this chapter is that both you and your child be able to maintain a relationship that is open and not judgmental.

5 Tips for Better Communication:

We know you're reading this thinking of ways to make your kids understand things from your perspective. But first, there are a few things you have to understand too.

Tip 1: Attention, please.

When talking with pre-pubescent and pubescent children about sexuality, communicating is mostly about listening. Whatever you're absorbed with at the moment, put it aside. Switch off the TV, shut your phone or computer and look at your child. This way they'll know how important it is to you, and that you are willing to give him/her the time to talk and ask questions.

Tip 2: Listen, really listen.

Shutting out and concentrating is something we are good at. But often, it's only when you really listen that things come to light. When your child is saying something, look for emotional cues that often lie between the lines¹. This is how you listen –

- keep eye contact
- don't speak when your child is talking
- don't interrupt even if you think he/she has said something embarrassing.

Respecting and acknowledging his or her opinions, questions and worries are part of the process and this requires wholeheartedly listening to everything your child says. Showing them that you're open to having a two-sided conversation lets them know that they can talk to you anytime.

Tip 3: Ask instead of preach.

In today's media-saturated world, a lot of the ideas children are exposed to could be very different from the values you'd wish for them to follow. While it is important for you to give the right prompts, helping them think about what is right or wrong for themselves will prod them to think of real consequences further on.

Instead of imposing your views, do ask questions that will help you to understand him/her better. Some samples:

- How do you feel about this?
- What do you think will happen if...?
- If ever, how will you handle the responsibilities that come with the consequences?

Ask open-ended questions. This gives your child a chance to explain his/her thoughts. Afterwards, speak about your concerns; explain WHY you feel a certain way. While you may feel like blurting out, "Just keep quiet already!" You might want to explain why early sex could lead to serious consequences that will impact their future.

Tip 4: Treat your child as you would want to be treated.

How do you react when confronted, by anyone at all? Hold that thought. Prepubescent and pubescent kids understand, own and feel the same emotions you do. When attacked and criticised, you'd probably feel that you're not respected and whatever that antagonising person says after that probably won't hold much weight anymore. Now, imagine how your kids would feel towards you when you criticise them. Not a pleasant thought is it?

Speak and treat your child with respect that you would want for yourself. Conflicts can be resolved with less criticising and more understanding.

Tip 5: Don't give up communicating.

Your child is growing up in a very different environment than you did. With ideas coming from all places, pressures from peers and the need to find their place, these can be overwhelming... but don't stop trying to connect with them. If communication becomes difficult, find someone both you and your child can trust to mediate. You should also be ready to reassess and change your own views and expectations.

Role Playing

Before "The Talk"

How to begin? What to say? When's the best time? These questions and more will be answered in the next few pages. Now, roll up your sleeves, it's prep time. With your spouse or a friend, talk about possible topics or questions you might encounter when speaking with your child about sexuality.

Quick warm-up questions

Ask your spouse or friend to think of candid questions your pubescent child might have or could be thinking about. If you're not sure how to answer or don't know the answer yourself – do look for reliable sources so you are ready for anything.

Some common **questions**^{2,3} asked by teens:

Ages 9 - 12

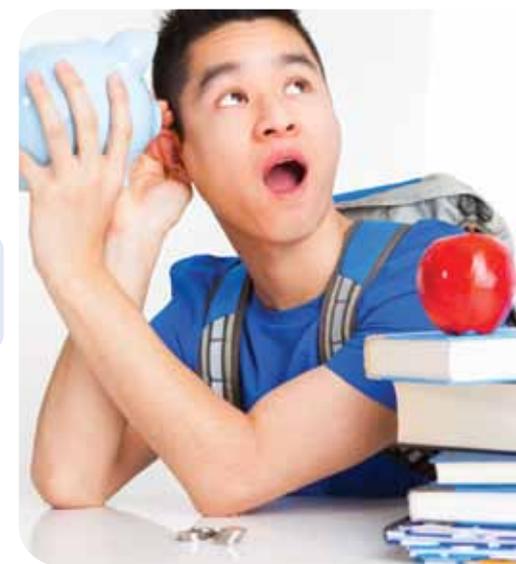
- What is sex?
- What is a condom?

Ages 13 - 17

- How do I say "No" to sex?
- What is unprotected sex?

Ages 18 onwards

- What is oral sex?
- Can I get pregnant without penetration?



How do you listen with all your might?

Listen with your eyes, your ears, and every ounce of focus you can muster. This is important to your child. He/she doesn't require for you to be sympathetic all the time. All children want is to be heard, understood and hopefully, accepted for the ideas and decisions they make, and for their questions truthfully answered.

Listening is in the intention and the body language: Maintain eye contact, try not to cross your arms as this gesture conveys a mistrust, don't interrupt but respond appropriately with "I understand, I see, I hear you, Okay, etc.", let your child know that you can even hear the words not being said, by reacting with your facial expressions and body posture.⁴

When's the best time to start the conversation?

The conversation starts when they start asking questions. As with any information, you have to give it to them in the right doses and in the right time that suits their frame of mind. With toddlers, talk about body parts. For eight year olds, the reproductive system. For those 11 or 12 years of age, they'll want to know what happens when two people have sex. By 13, you can talk about dating and the consequences of early sexual activity.

This is just a guide; you're still the best gauge as to when it is the right time to start the conversation. What is very important, is for you not to be dismissive when your child asks a question when they are very young. Do note that experts' advice is to start "The Talk" before your child is 15, or else by then he/she would have learned from other sources and might have formed their opinions on the matter.

How do you begin the conversation?

Wait for "teachable" moments

There will be plenty of chances in your daily life to bring it up, perhaps from a scene you're watching on TV, or a pregnant woman passing by, or by acknowledging visible changes in his or her appearance. If your child asks you something about his/her body or about relationships, use that to get a discussion going.

Start by being clear

Of course they will feel embarrassed and awkward talking to you about intimate sexual feelings. Let them know what you're getting to upfront by saying, "I don't want to say anything that might embarrass you, but if you have anything you want to ask – I am listening."

When you should do the asking

If your child is not asking anything, here are some questions you can ask to start a conversation:

- Do your friends talk about sex? What do they talk about?
- Have you ever thought about having a girlfriend / boyfriend?
- Do you think teen sex is okay? Do you think some teens have sex to impress their friends or to fit in?
- Have you heard or read about teenagers who are pregnant? How do you feel about that?
- Do you think sex / sexual acts are mentioned in the law at all? Why do you think so?



Consider This

What's your stand on the matter?

Before you sit your child down for "The Talk", discuss with your spouse and agree on these matters: When is it okay for your child to start dating? How about steady relationships? What's your take on teenage pregnancies? Some of us have belief systems and religions with very clear guidelines on what is acceptable and what is not – these should be brought out at the beginning. It is best to decide, as a couple, what values and messages are important to you and your family. Do you want to stress abstinence? Or should you also talk about protection?

Learn how to say "No"

Most of us will find it's a lot easier to say "Yes" than "No", especially if we want to avoid conflict. However, boundaries help children feel safe because they know what to expect, what you expect of them, and what their limits are. If you feel your child is not ready to start dating, be clear and honest about your reasons for saying no. Establish behavioural limits, household rules and boundaries, then lead by example by sticking to them. Be firm about these boundaries, and your child will learn to honour his/her word as they grow older.

Can a friend do the talking for you?

You are the best resource for the values you want to impart to your children. However, if by some reason you are not able to do so – make sure that the person you have picked to speak with your child shares the same values and objectives as you do.

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

Chances are they may have already read it, or a variation of it from friends or the internet. Your child has access to plenty of information at any given time – yet, these cannot communicate your values to him/her. Only you can.

Dad : Am so proud of you! Congrats on winning the game!

Allan : Thanks Dad! Can we stay to watch the next game for awhile?

Dad : Sure... it looks like you have fans!

Allan : They're just my classmates.

Dad : Classmates? Those girls look older than 15!

Allan : Hahaha. 15 year old girls always look older!

Dad : Is that true? It looks like you are going through some changes too.

Allan : It's just my voice...and I've already outgrown my clothes. I'm now the tallest player in my team! Do you think I'll stop growing, Dad? I don't want to stand out so much, hahaha.

Dad : Getting taller is the least of your concern. Besides, your height looks good on you! Wait till you get my age and start losing hair! Haha!



Attraction & Attention

It is bound to happen, and you know it. One day they're only interested in playing with dolls and planes and the next minute – those objects they've given so much affection to, have made way for music, fashion magazines, texting and endless chatting with their friends. With all the physical changes happening to their bodies, they become more attentive to their looks and at the same time, to the people around them. It's a natural course of life which you yourself have been through, and now is happening to your pubescent child. You know how it is; no one can stop what they feel for or about another person.

Visible Changes

Changes	Puberty Onset Average Age	
	Boys	Girls
Breast development	n/a	11 - 12 years
Testicular enlargement	11 - 14 years	n/a
Pubic hair development	11 - 14 years	6 months after breasts develop
Body Odour & Acne	11 - 14 years	11 - 12 years
Voice change	Starts at 11	n/a
Menstruation	n/a	12 - 13 years

From Boys to Men

On Bigger Parts, Wet Dreams & Mood Swings

The first physical changes he'll notice are that his testicles are getting bigger and hair growing around his genitals. His previously dormant testicles are "woken" by hormones. They start to enlarge, getting ready to produce testosterone and, eventually, sperm.

His penis and testes will continue to lengthen and he will soon begin to experience erections, the effect of the penis being filled with blood. Sometimes an erection is followed by an ejaculation, and semen (sticky white fluid containing sperm) flows out. This might also happen as he is sleeping and is called "wet dreams".

Wet dreams are natural and happen to lots of pubescent boys, but it doesn't happen to everyone.⁵ It could occur with arousing dreams or sometimes for no reason at all. It is the body's way of keeping the reproductive organs in check and it signals your boy's transition into manhood. Wet dreams eventually stop as your boy gets older.

Uncontrollable erections, called spontaneous erections, are very common and often an embarrassing part of puberty. They can happen in class, at the mall, while playing ball or any place and in the most inconvenient times. Tell your child that it's not weird and that it will become "less" spontaneous as he gets older.⁶ Some quick-fix tips: sit down, use your bag to cover, wear loose pants or longer shirts.

Hair, Pimples & Body Odour

As his hormones kick in, fine hair starts to grow on his face, limbs, chest and pubic area. By 18, he will have thick hair. At the same time, his body becomes more muscular. His hands, feet, and limbs will also grow faster than the other parts of his body.

This is also the time for you to emphasise good hygiene practices. His hormonal changes can cause sweat glands to work more and give him stronger body odours and pimples.

The Voice Breaks

Boys go through a phase when they have a hard time controlling their voice. It can be embarrassing and could happen in mid-sentence. Tell your son not to worry because this phase usually doesn't last very long. At puberty, your son's vocal chords thicken causing his voice to change. By about 15, his voice will become permanently lower.

Emotionally-charged Male Teens

All the physical changes your pre/teenage boy goes through at puberty come with an emotional barrage of new feelings. A rapidly changing body could make young people feel confused. Sexual feelings surface and hormonal changes may result in extreme mood swings.⁷ Parents: what they need, apart from much needed guidance, is understanding.



"Is this HAIR growing on my armpits? What's happening to me?"

What to say

"Yes, that's hair. From now on hair will grow under your arms, on your face and around your penis – eventually, maybe even on your chest too. When it grows, it just means you're growing up. Hair grows to regulate your body temperature and protects your body. Each boy, depending on when his hormones wake up, will start developing at different times."

What to do

Buy him a deodorant and get prepared to teach him about shaving. This is also the best time to teach him about good hygiene.

What to say

"Don't worry, it's normal. You're becoming a man. Most boys start having wet dreams when they are between 12 - 14 years old. And no, nothing is wrong if you don't get them either. This is the time that you start producing sperm and semen (a white, sticky fluid) which may flow out of the penis during sleep, that's why it's called a wet dream. Wet dreams may happen for no real reason or when you have arousing dreams."

What to do

If your child hasn't heard about wet dreams before and experiences it for the first time, it may be confusing, very embarrassing and scary. Do not make fun of him and explain that it's a natural occurrence. Encourage him to ask questions.

"Bed wetting? Or was it a wet dream? It's so embarrassing!"



From Girls to Women

On breasts, pimples & voracious appetites

When your little girl reaches the age of 11 - 12, sometimes even earlier, she will wake up without warning one day with her breasts growing, her hips becoming wider and her body, curvier. All the while she seems to be getting taller and taller every day. Puberty brings about significant physical changes in girls as their sex hormones, particularly progesterone and oestrogen become active. And with it, pimples may appear as well. These will make her self-conscious and she will start caring about her looks.

You'll also notice that she would have a bigger appetite and the weight gain may in turn, make her conscious about her appearance. It is important to explain to adolescent girls that this is a normal process and that unhealthy dieting can prevent her body from doing what it is supposed to do.

Menstruation

Mums, it is very important to speak to your daughter about menstruation before she actually gets there. It could be a very terrifying experience for a young girl who hasn't a clue what's happening to her body. Do explain that just before a girl gets her period, she is likely to see some sticky, pale yellowish mucus in her underwear. Tell her that it's a very natural process and every girl in the world, even her favourite female pop star, gets it.

You may consider getting a well-illustrated book to explain the basics. Do talk about being clean, the use of pads and liners, cramps, mood-swings, fatigue, sore breasts or bloatedness and how these can be alleviated with good diet, regular exercise and that she still can do normal things like sports even when she has her period. She also needs to know that having her period means that she has entered womanhood in full-swing and her body is preparing for her to eventually have babies. Stress that from this point on, she has to be extremely mindful of every action she takes.

Hair, there, everywhere

In about six months after her breasts start to develop, she 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, the importance of hygiene, or the use of deodorants if necessary.

The Adolescent Girl

Like boys, adolescent girls have to deal with so many physical transitions, her newfound self-awareness and the emotions that come with it. Amongst their peers and in the society, your daughter is now on a search for her identity, trying to fit in and belong. Hormonal changes can cause mood swings, so expect your child to be easily irritated.

And now, as she is more conscious about her looks, the possible breakout of pimples can make her feel more frustrated. She will be attracted to boys and would probably want some privacy to deal with her own thoughts. While you try to be more understanding, do offer some good avenues to release those pent up emotions, e.g. participation in sports.



"Am I weird? My friends already have breasts and I am still flat! Does that make me not pretty?"

What to say

"There is nothing wrong with you. It's different for every girl. Some girls start feeling their breasts grow as young as 9 years old, others at 14 and some may not finish growing until a later stage." Say that you don't need big breasts to be pretty or attractive. Let her know that she is beautiful just the way she is because she's a caring, thoughtful person.

What to do

She needs a confidence boost. Help her choose clothes that enhance her figure and teach her ways on how she can draw attention to other features such as her hair or eyes.

What to say

"Seeing blood in your underwear can be scary. But girls get periods because their bodies are working exactly as they should. Just as you urinate or clear your bowels, having your period is the monthly "maintenance" which takes place in your reproductive organs. Every single girl in the world goes through it.

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

"I am frightened about having my period. Does it mean I can't do PE or play sports?"

What to do

Visit the library with your daughter to find 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 should be used. Encourage her to eat well (good nutritious food helps) and get regular exercise.

Hints, Clues and Important Cues

Seriously speaking

As parents, we tend to hide uncomfortable words in "baby talk". When explaining serious things to your kids, use the correct terms so that they can treat it with the seriousness it deserves.

Pay attention

The physical changes of puberty are more evident on girls and can start as early as 8 or 9 years old. For boys, it becomes more apparent at about 11 to 13 years. Besides talking, it may be a good idea to get a book that explains these changes. Your child might prefer to read it on his/her own, but do let him/her know you are there to answer any questions.

The gift of confidence

As they live through this phase of change, confusion and finding their place in the world, one of the greatest things you can give your child is much needed confidence. Boost their self-esteem by praising when praise is due, acknowledging when they do good things and telling them you are proud of who they are.

Just be there

Sometimes you don't have to say anything. Sometimes you have to wait for your adolescent child to be the one to approach and talk to you. The important thing is that at any given time they need you – you are there to provide a listening ear, no matter the topic at hand.

While you may feel the pressure to have a reply for all of your child's doubts and queries, it is perfectly okay to tell him/her that you don't have the answer. Perhaps you can suggest that you read up or discuss together, and arrive at a mutually acceptable position.



SCENARIO 4

Accept it

It was bound to happen. Puberty signifies the awakening of sexual urges. Accept that it is normal for your child to start becoming attracted to the other people (and some young people may be attracted to the same sex.)

Reprimanding your child for having these feelings will make him/her uncomfortable the next time you want to talk to them about intimate matters. Do not be quick to judge and really listen to what your child has to say. Remember those teenage crushes you had? You have that in common with your child now, and sharing them your stories can help both of you understand what your child is going through.

Have a laugh

Sometimes you have to be serious, because educating kids about sexuality is a serious matter. But sometimes injecting humor during appropriate times is a good way to tackle “growing pains”.

IMPORTANT: When a touch is or isn't appropriate

You can't always be around to protect your child. That's why it's important that even at a young age, they know and are able to gauge for themselves when something is right or wrong. Tell your child it is usually okay to be hugged and kissed by people whom he/she knows and loves. However, it is essential that your child also recognises when a touch is or isn't appropriate, even from someone he/she knows and trusts.

Tell him/her that it is appropriate when someone hugs you to thank you for something. And if you're feeling sad, an embrace is also a way to show comfort. Hugs aren't supposed to hurt or make you feel uncomfortable. An inappropriate touch is something that makes him/her uneasy, especially if has to do with anyone's private parts and is told not to tell anyone else about it.

Teach him/her that should they ever get into that situation, 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. a parent or a teacher.



Mum : How was your class gathering last night?

Allan : It was okay.

Mum : What did you do? Did the girl you like come along? What's her name?

Allan : We watched a movie and her name is Tina.

Mum : Well... are you going to tell me more about her or do you want me to ask all the embarrassing questions? Hahaha.

Allan : She's my classmate.

Mum : So, she's 15? Was it a group date?

Allan : Yes Ma – to both questions. Why are you so worried? We were hanging out, that's all.

Mum : Am I worried? No, I am not. I am just curious. And you're going on a holiday with your friends tomorrow. Will she be there?

Allan : Sigh... okay, I'll tell you what I know. Her dad works in a bank. Her mom stays at home to take care of her baby brother. She's allergic to flowers and she has a curfew. So, no she won't be coming for the trip.

Mum : Is she smart? Pretty? Tall? Can we meet her someday?

Allan : Ma!!! Hahaha!

Mum : Okay... I won't ask anymore, you tell me when you're ready. It's just that you're growing up so fast!

Allan : Don't worry Dad talked to me last night about 'the rules' when it comes to dating. I want to take my time getting to know her anyway.

Mum : Are you okay with 'the rules'?

Allan : Yes... but you both have to trust me too.

Mum : You have always been caring, considerate and responsible – how not to trust you darling?



Puberty, Adolescence and Family Values

Instilling a moral compass in your adolescent child is one of the most crucial tasks of being a parent. You'll be glad to know that a survey conducted in 2010 by National Family Council reveal that family values such as love, care and concern, commitment, mutual respect, filial responsibility and communication are cherished by both the older and younger generations.⁸

So, despite the many different and often contradicting messages your child is bombarded with through their peers and media, there is something intrinsic about our environment that allows them to absorb and choose to conform to the value systems.

This is a quick checklist of things to discuss with your spouse, before you have a talk with your children:

- What are the virtues you embrace?
- What principles guide your behaviour?
- What traits are most important to you, e.g. integrity, compassion, tolerance, equality, and forgiveness?
- What do your religious beliefs or faiths ask of you?

But how do we instill these values?

By being role models

There is no better way for a child to learn things than by observing them from you. If they don't understand why some things have to be a certain way, sit them down, explain why it's important to you and how it affects them and the people around them. If they raise questions, listen to what they have to say and try to understand where they're coming from. Saying, "That's just how our family is" could work for or against you, so don't be hasty with your answers.

Acknowledge their positive attitude and behaviour

Praise works wonders. Not only will they remember to react the same way again the next time they are faced with similar circumstances, they will also feel good about themselves.

What's on their minds?

How do I look?

An awakening of self. That's what this phase is for them. It's like they are looking at themselves for the first time and – they're looking around if anybody else notices it. Both genders may struggle with the idea of what it means to be beautiful or handsome.

Take time to explain that looks are just ONE part of what makes them special. A good-looking person may be popular but a person can be beautiful for their talents, their personality, their courage and many other things. Praise your child for his/her talents and encourage him/her to see the beauty in everyone. Soon enough they will figure out for themselves that looks aren't everything.

What will my friends think?

They want to belong and do as their friends do. There are many pressures they have to face and they are more prone to experiment and try things. Parents, this is something you have to accept. You can't protect them from heartbreaks or mistakes, but you can prepare them by talking about respect, not only for themselves, but for others too. Stress that no one should do what they are uncomfortable with. Talk about your own experiences; you'll be amazed at how much your child wants to know about what you went through.

But I'm curious!

Parents, the truth is, whether you like it or not – your child is discovering his/her body, and naturally he/she would have desires and thoughts about experimenting sexually. Take masturbation (rubbing the private parts) for example. If your child asks about it or you catch him/her doing it, do not scream, get angry or 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, do let your child know that if done too often it can become an obsession.

How do you manage that? First of all, you have to be calm and think of ways for them to pursue other interests like sports or community service, and activities which are supervised by adults.

Am I in love?

Do you remember being a teenager and falling in love for the first time? At that time, nothing else mattered, right? Now, your child will go through that and you both have to be prepared for it. No matter what you say to your child that first loves often don't last forever, they probably won't believe you. But there's no harm in telling them that love is based on true friendship, trust, support and companionship – which often takes years to develop. If your teen wants to be in a "steady" relationship, get to know the girlfriend or boyfriend. Some parents find this process quite interesting!





"I caught my child looking at porn! What should I do?"

What to say to a 12-year-old

Before you speak, think, breathe and sit down. And yes, you can be stern, but getting mad and screaming at this point won't undo what just happened. As calmly as you can, ask what they're looking at and why. Say that you know it's interesting and exciting to discover and see things about the human body, so it's not "bad" to want to

look at them. But very often, these pictures depict sex in a wrong way, especially if they demean and objectify women. And you have to stress that these are just people acting or posing this way for money.

To a 16-year-old

The older your child gets, the more curious he becomes about his sexuality. Express to your child your opinions about pornography

"My daughter's friends are already dating at age 14 – she is asking when she can start. What do I say?"

What to say

Ask what she thinks dating is all about, and what she thinks people do on dates. Tell her that while you trust her, it is normal for you as a parent to want to protect her

from many things like being heartbroken, from being harmed in any way, from sexual predators, and from the risk of pregnancy and STIs. If there are rules on asking for permission to start dating, this is the time to highlight those to her.

What to do

First of all – don't assume that dates mean sexual activity. When parents get over-protective, it's more likely their kids will rebel. With your spouse, decide on the ground rules. When you do decide to let her date, make sure she stays contactable. Talk to her about being in uncomfortable situations and how to say no if she doesn't like what's happening. And do make it a point to meet the boy she is dating. Also, recognise that you must also give her privacy, an important step to gaining her trust.

only after you have asked them their feelings about the subject. Chances are, your teenager is aware of the implications of watching pornography. He is at an age where he begins to make his own decisions, and as parents you can be there to help him make better choices. It is important to establish an understanding on accountability, and open communication.

Also, let him know that if they download or are found with pornographic pictures they can get in trouble with the law. It's illegal and most importantly, pornography can give him/her wrong ideas about sex.

What to do

You can't blindfold your child. If he/she is curious and wants to look, they will find a way. Avoid scolding or yelling at your teen for looking at sexy pictures – it is a normal phase of growing up. But don't be lenient about it either. As much as you can, supervise your child when using the computer. You can also install software on the home computer to block or limit such pop-ups and spam.

"My 13-year-old son wants to start dating, but I don't think he's ready. How do I say no?"

What to say

"I feel it's time to discuss the appropriate age for you to begin dating. It would be good for you to spend this time making more friends, and getting to know the person you like in a group setting to learn more about him/her. There is no need to rush when it comes to dating, love and sex. It is perfectly okay to wait until you are emotionally ready to start dating, and when that day comes, I will be there to offer my support and guidance. "

What to do

Saying no can be a delicate issue as you may worry it will make your child rebel. But there are some instances where you, as a parent, need to put your foot down. Reason with your child why they shouldn't be dating or having sex when they're not ready. Sharing with them your own stories about dating not only serves as an example to follow, but can help you bond with your child over common experiences.

"My 16-year-old daughter is in a serious relationship, but I think she should slow things down."

What to say

"Being in a serious relationship requires plenty of maturity and commitment. While I am happy that you have found someone who loves and cares about you, I feel you should take it easy and remember that there is more to being a young adult than finding

a partner. I worry that you may be spending too much time with your boyfriend, instead of engaging in activities with other people in your life."

What to do

As your teen starts to date seriously, it would be good to remind yourself that you don't need to know "everything" about the relationship. You may at first have a hard time and feel like something is wrong. That is normal – your parenting role is changing. Let your teenager know that you are supportive of the relationship, but that she needs to learn to strike a healthy balance between love and friendship. It may also make you feel comfortable if you take the time to meet and get to know her newfound love.



"I want to set boundaries such as a curfew for my child, but I don't want to sound too preachy!"

What to say To a 13-year-old

"I am uncomfortable about you coming home too late at night. For your safety, perhaps we can come to an agreement on your curfew. If you feel you need it to be extended on special occasions, I hope you can speak to me about it so that we can negotiate. When you are older I will be more than happy to extend your curfew further, provided you have shown that you are responsible enough to keep to it."

To a 16-year-old

"I am setting these boundaries for you because I want you to be safe and responsible even when you're having fun. Since we have an agreement, I would really appreciate if you keep your end of the deal. I trust that I can rely on you, but as it is with being a mature and responsible member of the family, there will be consequences if these boundaries are crossed."

What to do

Setting boundaries should not only be about the "no". Make sure you take time to say "yes", too. Strike a balance in the boundaries that you set; when boundaries are too restrictive or overprotective, they may incite a feeling of mistrust between you and your child. Give him/her a dependable, reasonable structure, with enough space to grow so that they can decide for themselves the type of adult they want to become, with your guidance.

"I found a condom in my son's bag! What now? "

What to say To a 13-year-old

First of all, calm down. When you are ready to speak to your son, do so without judgment and accusations – ask him where he got the condom from, what are his opinions on pre-marital sex, and whether his friends share the same sentiments. It is always good to know his peers, as teens tend to turn to each other for

advice and support. It is important that he understands the values you uphold, and the consequences and responsibilities that come with engaging in sexual intercourse.

To a 17-year-old

Don't jump into any conclusions. The good thing in this is that your child is aware of using protection when thinking about sex. The bad thing is, there is no easy way

to approach this situation without being confrontational. We know this is a serious and delicate matter to any parent, so try to calm down – compose yourself, and then have a talk with your child.

Tell him/her that while it is very normal to love someone and have sexual feelings towards that special someone, sex is not the only way to express love. After asking what needs to be asked, here are a few things you can say: Having sex is a big decision that not just involves protection, but feelings and responsibilities.

Highlight the possible consequences and ask things like: are you prepared for unwanted pregnancy or possible infections?

Would you be breaking the law even if both parties consent to sex? What happens if you fall out of love and break up?

What to do

We have to say it again – don't jump into any conclusions. Listen to what your teenager is saying and not saying to you. State the facts about safe sex, condoms and protection – and that there is no guarantee that any particular method can protect them from different STIs. Another thing you might want to do is provide opportunities like family outings, where there are adults around, and where they can be together without the temptation of sex.

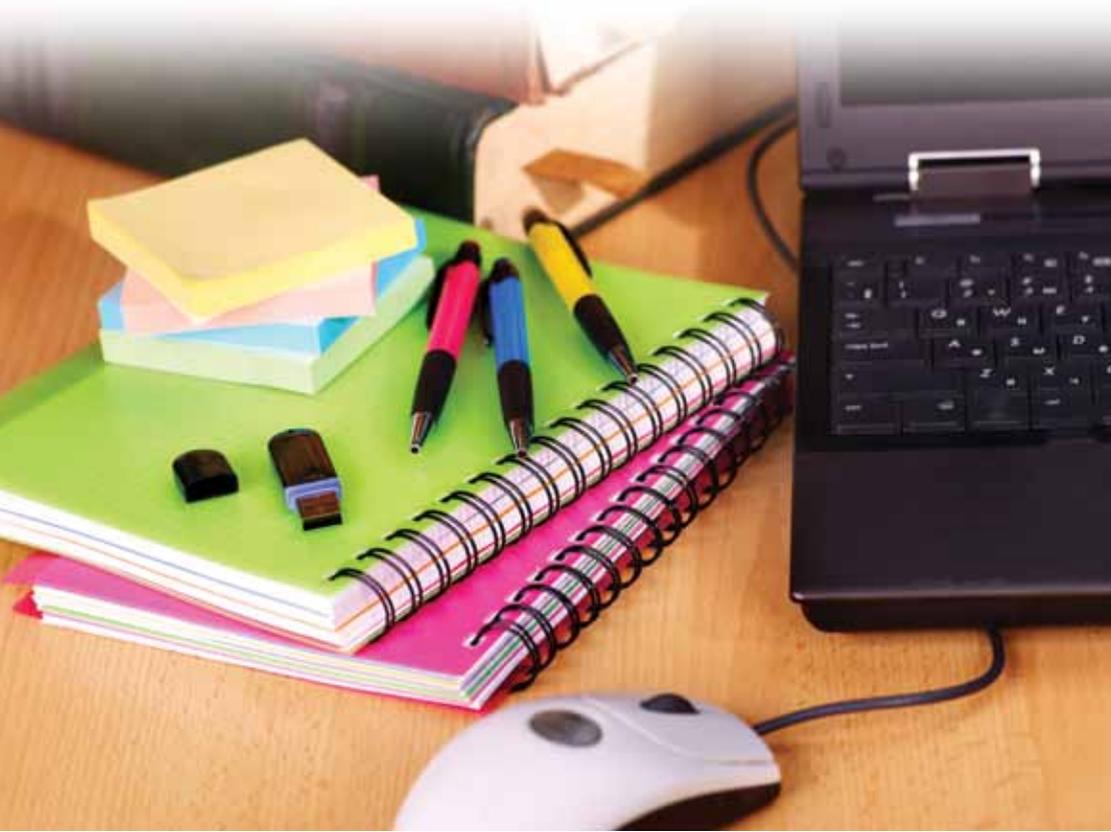
"I am worried that my child will give in and have sex because of peer pressure."

What to say

Sometimes teens think that having sex with their boyfriends/girlfriends will keep them happy and prove how in love they are. Sex shouldn't be used to prove anything. No one should be pressured into having sex. While it's admirable when someone is willing to give so much of themselves to another, sex is a huge step and it comes with so much responsibility and may result in many different consequences.

What to do

Everyone has their personal anecdotes about doing things when they're not prepared – and how things didn't turn out too well after that. Reason with your child why they shouldn't be having sex when they're not ready. It's in this process of reasoning and discussing that your adolescent learns to decide for themselves what kind of lives they want to live.



SCENARIO 5

What happens if...

Grab your spouse or a willing friend to have a verbal spar and bounce off ideas on what possible conversations you might have with your child when a) He/she doesn't want to talk about it and b) When a child goes against family values. This will help you prepare and better deal with situations should it arise. It can be quite trying when your personal values are challenged, but in a family, things can be resolved with patience and understanding.

Sample Scenario A:

Mum, I already know everything you're going to say. You don't have to tell me anything. Can I go now?

Sample answer for Scenario A:

I am glad you already know the things you need to know. I am just concerned that you might have heard or read the wrong things about sex. If you have any questions or things you're not clear about, I want you to know that you can always ask me. I understand that it's embarrassing to talk about it but if you need advice I am here – or if you like, maybe you could talk to your aunt/uncle.

Sample Scenario B:

I knew you were brought up that way, Dad, but my generation is different!

Sample answer for Scenario B:

Help me understand what is different? Whatever disagreement we might have it can always be resolved by trying to understand each other. I care for you very much and I respect you, that's why I want to understand. I hope you can try to understand me too.

IMPORTANT: Lurking Dangers

One of the challenges that parents face today is how best to protect their kids from the possible dangers of sexual predators. Through social networks, chat rooms or online games, these predators pose as other players "befriending" kids, gaining their confidence, giving them attention to the point where they might lower their inhibitions, and manipulate them – and this can lead to sexual exploitation.

To prevent these incidents from happening:

- Know the people with whom your child is spending time
- Pay attention to their online activities
- Emphasise that it is wrong for adults to engage children in sexual activity
- Talk to them openly

Dad : There you are! I was looking for you at the kids' section.

Jane : Hi Dad! I just wanted to get a few books here.

Dad : Are those young adult books?

Jane : Why?

Dad : You know, your aunt used to read those kinds of books when she was as young as you.

Jane : Really?

Dad : Then when she started dating boys, she thought dates are when boys give you flowers and chocolates. Haha. Is that how you think dating is?

Jane : No, dating is when a guy texts a girl a lot, and they go out to get ice cream.

Dad : But I text you and your brother a lot! And we all have ice cream! Haha. I guess that's a family date!

Jane : Dad! That's different!

Dad : Then, what's a date to you?

Jane : A date is when a girl and a boy like each other and they want to get to know each other more. I've seen it before in my favourite show, where the lead character has a crush on this girl, and in the end he asks her out on a date.

Dad : You know a lot about dating. And you're smart! Are you sure you're only 10? Haha.

Jane : Almost 11, Dad.

Dad : Eleven? No wonder you're getting so tall! I thought you were becoming a giant!

Jane : Haha. I'm not that tall yet!

Dad : You know that you can only start dating when you're older, right?

Jane : But what if I get flowers and chocolate?

Dad : When that happens, can you promise to tell me?

Jane : Only if you don't ask me to return the flowers.

Dad : Haha... okay. That's a deal.



CONSEQUENCES

Teaching them truths & consequences

Mom or Dad, if you've skipped the other chapters and dove straight into this one looking for pure facts just minutes before you launch into a "lecture" with your adolescent child – stop, breathe, think.

We know it is not easy raising what seems like just a few weeks ago, your toddler, who now seems like a stranger filled with curiosity, opinions and secrets. They also tend to think that they already know everything there is to know, and what they don't know, they will find out from friends. As for teen pregnancy and STIs, they tend to think that it can't possibly happen to them. As this is a preemptive action, experts say that a good time to bring up these issues would be when your teenager is about 13 or 14 years old.

The Gentle Warning Approach

While it would be tempting to just list out the scary facts, hoping that your child won't even think about having sex – pure scare tactics are not the best strategy. You don't want your child to associate sex only with horrible diseases. This could affect his/her relationships in the future.

Give gentle warnings, which basically means speak to him/her when you're not angry. Make it a casual conversation, leaving space for questions. Citing real-life incidents can be a good way to get the discussion going. Highlight that some nasty things can and do happen, which can be uncomfortable at best and deadly at worst.



Besides warning them about STIs and unwanted pregnancies, be prepared to tell them these facts:

- Using condoms are not a guarantee that you are safe or that it will prevent pregnancy. Condoms "fail" if they are not used correctly, stored properly or if they are expired. While they can help reduce the risk of gonorrhoea, chlamydia, and even HIV, condoms are not 100% effective in protecting you from STIs.
- Besides the condom, there are other methods of contraception. Again, while these might prevent unwanted pregnancy, they will not protect against STIs.
- The laws on underage sex: 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.

"Weigh The Responsibilities" Approach

They think they're deeply in love and thinking that just maybe, the person they're dating is the one. With that comes the need to prove their love and be cherished. This is why you have to talk about relationships, that good and lasting relationships involve responsibility, concern and care. Which means thinking beyond the moment and acknowledging an array of probabilities and circumstances that come with anything they do. Especially when it comes to sex.

While no one knows for certain what will happen, it won't hurt to prompt your child to think ahead – perhaps by asking questions like "What if the unexpected happens and someone ends up pregnant? Could you handle that right now? How do you think that will affect the future for both of you? What about school? Have you considered how both your families will be affected?"

The House Rules Approach

The truth is, you can't expect a teenager with raging hormones, to lock in all his or her desires. As a parent, accepting an eventual "steady" girlfriend or boyfriend is a natural process of your child's life. It will happen sooner or later. While guiding them to be informed and responsible individuals, there is no harm setting up a few house rules to help your child manage his/her desires.

- Set boundaries on physical intimacy. For example, holding hands and hugging is okay, but no intense/deep kissing or petting.
- Avoid going to each other's homes when there is no one else there. Also, ask them to avoid going to quiet places such as parks, void decks, staircases, etc.
- Plan and encourage group outings, include your child's "steady" in your family activities whenever possible, without stifling them – this way you'll have them under your safe eye!

Dealing With Teen Pregnancy

Here's a scenario you might want to be prepared for – if you find out your daughter is pregnant, what will you do?

You have every right to be shocked, hurt, angry or disappointed at the unexpected news of your teenage child being pregnant. And it is perfectly understandable if you are unable to handle the situation or contain your emotions, so do turn to people who can help.



But at the time that your daughter needs you most, don't turn her away. How you decide to deal with your daughter's pregnancy depends a lot on the circumstances and what is right for her.

Discuss all options with her such as keeping or aborting the pregnancy. She and her partner would both need to be clear about all possible consequences. 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, 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. It could get nasty, and he could be punished by the law.

When to let them be

We brushed their hair, tied their shoes, got used to telling them what to and what not to do, and now? They're quite capable of doing everything on their own, thinking what they want to think, and trying out their newfound sense of individuality and independence.

While our kids are clearly still dependent on us in many ways, at some point everyone who is placed in 'dependent' positions feel controlled, helpless, frustrated, and sometimes worthless and resentful.⁹ Especially when they are aware that they can do so many things by themselves.

Encouraging autonomy gives them the opportunity to become responsible individuals. And by allowing them to think for themselves, they become aware of the responsibility for the trust you are giving.

Letting them be doesn't mean leaving them to their own devices. You would still need to be there to guide them. So you must be wondering – how exactly does it work?

Here are a few helpful steps from *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* authors Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish:

- Let your children make choices.
- Show respect for their struggles.
- Don't ask too many questions.
- Don't rush to answer questions.
- Don't take away hope.

Now let's put them in the context of sexuality.

Let your children make choices.

Even for you and I, when given choices, we know that we are personally involved in the outcome of the situation. Which only means we know that we are part, if not fully, accountable for the things we do. Guess what? Your kids know this too. They only seek that freedom to live their choices and hopefully be accepted for it. Okay, now... what if the question is, "When can I start dating?"



This is a tough one. You're probably saying, "This has nothing to do with choice but maturity!" But when is that? They'll want you to be specific – what age? They only want something to look forward to. Let them know that they are involved in the decision process and this, in turn, will give them that sense of control that all human beings intrinsically crave for.

You still know what's best for your child, but points of discussion and areas of choice could be in these conversation prompts: Before we talk about when, how about we both decide the rules? I wanted to tell you that you can start dating when you're mature enough – do you think you are?

Show respect for their struggles.

Physical changes, peer pressure worries, hormonal bursts, an awakened self-consciousness, and a sudden need to assert their individuality – you have so much to deal with! Can you imagine what they are going through themselves? Remember that all this is new to them. So dear parent, give them space to figure things out. Be attentive, but don't pry too much.

Don't ask too many questions.

This is a difficult one. It's a matter of showing concern but not too much. How does one show concern without overdoing it? The important thing is to be sensitive to the possible consequences of your questions.¹⁰ A question as simple as "Where were you?" could sound suspicious, confrontational or accusing. You might want to try to be a little bit more conversational. For example: "I was at the mall awhile ago and wanted to get pizza, I was thinking of calling you – where were you?"

Don't rush to answer questions.

When kids ask you the most bewildering questions, it probably means they've thought of possible answers for it already and just want a confirmation. Even if the answers are ready in your mind, help them think for themselves, and say "What do you think?" Allowing them the chance to come up with solutions or answers helps them discover that they are capable of making decisions.

Don't take away hope.

You can't stop anyone from dreaming their dreams, or wishing their wishes. But when you take away hope by saying things like "That's never going to happen", their self-confidence is splintered and they begin to doubt themselves more and more. Or they could go the opposite way and make it a point to prove that you're wrong. When it comes to the issues of the heart, go easy on popping those thought bubbles.

Parents, do highlight to your child that Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) can happen to anyone. Even if it's the first and only sexual contact. And especially if partners have had other partners before. In Singapore, STIs among 10 - 19 year olds rose from 238 cases per year in 2002 to 820 cases per year in 2007.

Simplified explanation to tell your kids: When people have sex, bacteria and viruses can pass between them. Semen, vaginal fluid, and 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 realise 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, genital herpes and genital warts have no cure.
- It is important to have an 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.



Common STIs in Singapore

STI	Cause	Symptoms (may vary from person to person)	Treatment
Genital Herpes	Spread by Herpes Simplex Virus Type 2, via close skin contact including unprotected and oral sex.	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.	No cure. Medicated cream, antiviral tablets, saline baths for pain relief. Prone to recurrence.
Genital Warts	Spread by Human Papilloma Virus via close skin contact usually during unprotected sex. Sometimes there is no identified source of transmission of the virus.	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.	No cure. Small warts can be removed with nitrogen (freezing), diathermy (heat) or a chemical paint. Tend to recur.
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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic pain • A higher risk of pregnancy in the fallopian tube • Infertility

STI	Cause	Symptoms (may vary from person to person)	Treatment
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.

SCENARIO 6

Dad : Jane, your favourite drama is on.

Mum : I thought that character is getting married to the girl with long hair? Why is he holding hands with this other girl –?

Jane : Oh! They broke up because this new girl is his childhood sweetheart.

Dad : What?

Jane : You won't understand. They're in love still!

Dad : Haha. Of course, I understand.

Allan : Can we turn the channel? I don't like the story.

Jane : But Dad said I could watch!

Mum : You kids know that in real life – it's not as easy as switching the channel if you don't like the story right?

Allan : I know. I just don't like that people fall out of love so easily. And then just as easily fall in love with someone else.

Dad : What would you do if you were the guy?

Jane : If I were the guy, I'd keep them both as friends.

Allan : If I were the guy, I'd be more careful about breaking people's hearts.

Mum : I think we're raising you kids just right.

Dad : Yes, we are.



RESOURCES

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).

ComCare Hotline: 1800-222-0000

The ComCare Hotline is a toll-free telephone number that links all Family Service Centres (FSC). It operates in English, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and common dialects. Parents requesting for counseling help on sexuality issues can dial this number and be directed to the FSC nearest to your home.

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