

Teenage pregnancy & sexual health

"I know my boyfriend loves me really... it's just that he's at school too, so it's a bit difficult at the moment. I never knew you could get pregnant the first time you have sex... mum never told me - I thought it would be alright but it's not, I just don't know what to do."

- Britain has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections in Europe
- Be proactive in your approach by taking the initiative in raising issues about sex and relationships
- Explain that sex is not compulsory and that saying no is an option
- Try not to give the message that sex is necessarily a problem. Be prepared to talk about sexuality, even if it seems difficult
- Try not to be judgmental, but don't be afraid to say if you think an activity may be unhealthy or could put your son or daughter at risk
- Young people will learn by example - they will learn your family's way of doing things based on your values, culture, faith and belief

Preventative parenting

Children will learn about sex whether you want them to or not. Sex is everywhere around us - in magazines and newspapers, in advertisements and soap operas. Children and young people also learn about sex from each other - and what gets passed on in the playground may not be accurate or what parents want them to hear!

All these confusing messages may lead young people into situations they don't know how to deal with. As a parent you have an important role in making sure your child has the right information and skills to cope with these pressures. Using the opportunities provided by the media can start a discussion.

You might feel concerned that by discussing sex and relationships, particularly at an early age, you will encourage your children to start having sex when they're very young. But research has proved that the opposite is true. In fact, teenagers from families where parents talk frankly about sex wait until they are older than others before they start having sex. And when they do have sex for the first time, they are more likely to use contraceptives.

It is shocking to know that some young people are sexually active as young as 11 or 12, although the average age for first sex is 17. The fact is that you can't always stop your teenagers from having sex and many of them will do it anyway. What you can do is to educate them about sex, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/Aids and contraception. Start early as often young people say they had access to information too late.

If you feel uncomfortable or unsure about talking about sex with your children, don't worry - this is a common reaction. But don't let it put you off. Sex education shouldn't be a one-off talk but a gradual process of communication. If your children grow up knowing it's ok to discuss sex and the feelings they have with you, then they're much more likely to come to you for support when they need it.

The UK has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe and sexually transmitted infections are increasing among young people. Giving your children support, information and help to feel good about themselves can lessen the chances of both.

WARNING SIGNS

Young people will not always speak to their parents if they have any concerns. They tend to talk to a best friend or other close family members. If you become aware that they are stressed or worried it would be useful to let them know you are there to listen and give support.

ACTION

If you think that your child is sexually active, ensure that they know where to get the right information. If you think your daughter may be pregnant or if she has told you that she is, ensure she attends a family planning clinic.

WHAT TO SAY

Talk to your teenagers about making choices in relationships and about contraception. Make your sons aware that pregnancy is not just a girl's problem.

PREVENTION

Make sure that your teenagers know about, and practice, safe sex. There are professionals who can talk to them and give them information and advice. Remember it's not just about avoiding unplanned pregnancy but also to avoid sexually transmitted infections.

CONTACTS

- SEXWISE 0800 282930
- Information Shop for Young People 01274 432432
- Upfront Teenage Pregnancy Team 01274 432445
- Young People's Clinics 01274 228910/228770
- Sure Start Plus - advice to pregnant teenagers and teen parents 01274 437233
- Dad's Matter (Sure Start) 01274 437233
- BLAGY - for young bisexual, lesbian and gay young people 01274 744724
- The School Nurse attached to your child's school will advise you.
- Off the Record 01274 733080
- Family Friends of Lesbian and Gays (FFLAG) 01454 852418
- Family Planning Association (FPA) 0845 310 1334

*Check the Bradford ACPC website for the latest phone numbers:
www.bradford-acpc.com*