

Common questions about...

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUAL HEALTH



Talking to your child about relationships and sexual health is never easy but parents and caregivers play such an important role in sharing good information and guiding children and adolescents. Having someone who they can go to, to ask questions and who they know will give them honest answers, can really help them at different stages of their lives. Understanding and discussing puberty, sex, and relationships with your child is an essential part of their development but it can be difficult for us as adults to have these conversations.

We may not feel we know the facts or we might feel very uncomfortable talking about certain topics, but it is so important to provide your child with clear and honest information and support in a world where they are surrounded by myths and misinformation.

The key is to start talking early in childhood and keep the conversations going as they grow up. Practise talking about sensitive topics before your child gets to the stage where they become shy and don't want to discuss things with you.

Talking openly can help build trust and support them to be prepared to make healthier and safer decisions. It can also help them to stay safe if they understand issues like consent, good and bad touches and abuse and exploitation.

In some contexts, these direct conversations can be very difficult for parents or caregivers so you could think about finding another trusted adult to help with the discussions such as an aunt or community leader, or you can share material with your child that you know is accurate and helpful.



What is key is that your child knows where to go to get trusted and honest information when they need it.



All the questions in this Q&A are based on frequent examples received from young people and parents and caregivers through UNICEF digital platforms, social listening reports and IoT analytics. The answers were developed in collaboration with a reference group of young people from the ESAR region and reviewed by technical staff from UNICEF, UNFPA and UNAIDS.

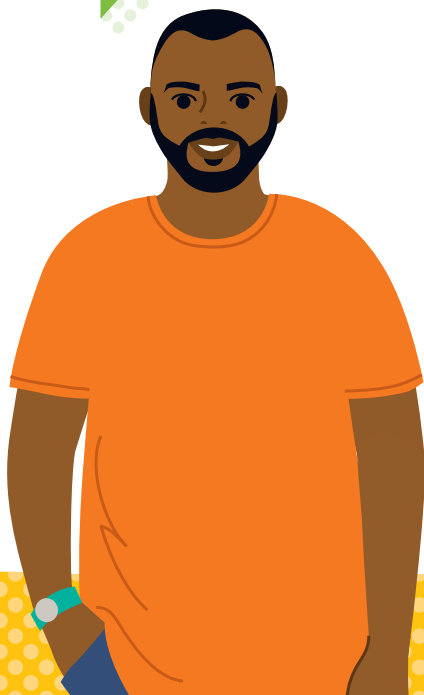
1

If I start talking to my child about sex won't it just encourage them to engage in risky behaviours?



There's lots of evidence – including from Eastern and Southern Africa – to show that providing accurate information about relationships and sexual health actually encourages good decision making and safer choices.

Talking to your child helps them understand things better, promotes choice and responsibility and supports them to make more informed and thoughtful decisions about their actions and relationships.



2

At what age should I begin discussing these topics with my child?



The most important advice is to start early and keep talking so that as they grow, they develop a deeper understanding of relationships and sexual health and how to look after themselves and others. It is important to be guided by the child and what they know but start conversations about consent, boundaries and body changes when your children are in primary school. As your child grows you can add in more detailed information about puberty, relationships, contraception and sexual health.



You can also help them to understand where they can get sexual and reproductive health services and support, and that making informed decisions for themselves is important.

3

How do I know that my child will understand?



Think about your child's age and the topics that are most suited to their stage of development. Begin with names for the parts of the body and changes during puberty. Explain that healthy relationships make us feel good about ourselves and are based on good communication and respect. Teach them about good and bad secrets and that no one should make them do things they don't want to do.

Look for materials, videos, stories that can help you discuss different topics. Encourage questions and provide honest answers. Reassure your child that they can always come to you with their questions. Repeat these conversations – make it a regular and normal discussion where they can ask questions and talk about things that are on their mind.

Don't wait until they are teenagers, they are less likely to ask you questions and trust your advice and as a result they will be less prepared to look after themselves and others.



4

How can I teach my child about consent and respecting other people in relationships?



Use simple examples and stories to explain **consent** and stress the importance of asking for, and respecting someone's permission, before touching or engaging in any activity. Don't use fear as a tactic but be open with your child and teach them to recognise and respect their own boundaries as well as others'.

Boundaries just mean what they feel safe and comfortable with. This should be about parts of the body they feel ok being touched – 'good touch' might be shaking hands or hugging, while 'bad touch' is when someone wants to touch them in a way that feels uncomfortable or wrong.

Helping your child understand consent and boundaries at an early age can support them to know when someone is crossing that boundary and that they need to speak out.



Understanding their right to be safe and not to be touched without consent can help protect them from abuse.

5

Why is my child so rude and disobedient with me?



Teenagers who are moody and challenge parents and caregivers are very common. During adolescence, lots of changes take place in the brain and there are changes in hormones that can affect emotions. As they grow up, adolescents become more independent and want to take decisions for themselves. Peers and friends become more important, and they often start to reject advice from parents, caregivers and other adults.

When talking to your child, try to avoid arguments and talk openly about how they are feeling. You may feel that the only response is to punish them but this is likely to push them away. Help them manage their feelings, show that you understand their emotions and mood swings are normal and not always something they can control.



Explain how it makes you feel too and ask how you can try and help each other to manage better. Using 'I' statements can help show how you feel. "When you act like that I feel sad." Showing them that you can be positive and try to resolve things can help them. Working together can allow them to develop emotional intelligence, coping skills, and the ability to communicate more effectively.

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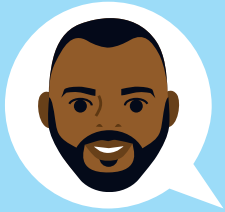
I think my child is taking drugs and alcohol – how do I stop them?



For any parent or caregiver, it can be very worrying to discover a child is using alcohol or drugs, but it is often something that adolescents experiment with in their teens. The most important thing is to approach your child with empathy and understanding.



Discuss the potential risks and consequences of their actions, while emphasising your concern for their safety and well-being. Talk to them about why they do it and what would help them to avoid it.



You may find it hard not to take control and put down rules and restrictions, but it is important that you work with your child to understand and tackle the issues they are facing.

The teenage years have always been linked to more risk taking as changes in hormones and brain development lead to greater independence and desire to try new things. Substances can of course be dangerous and damaging to your child's health, but to stop they need to understand the risks and also have the opportunity to talk about why they are using substances. It could be peer pressure, to deal with issues they are struggling with, or just part of a process of experimenting and discovering new things as an adolescent.

7

Why does my child insist on wearing clothes I think are inappropriate and will bring unwanted attention.



Adolescence is a time during which we begin to find our identity. It is a time to try new things and for lots of adolescents, a time to deliberately challenge what is expected of them. They want to make their own choices, to express themselves or to explore who they are. Being strict and forbidding your child to wear certain clothes is likely to create conflict and resentment. Have an open, non-judgmental conversation with your child about appropriate clothing choices and the messages different styles may convey.

Discuss the importance of personal expression but discuss the social norms and expectations that others will have of them in your community. Talk to them about the types of assumptions or judgments that people might make.

Try not to insult or judge them but explain your concerns. It is likely they will still want to express themselves in their own way so emphasise the importance of staying safe and how to deal with unwanted sexual comments or harassment.



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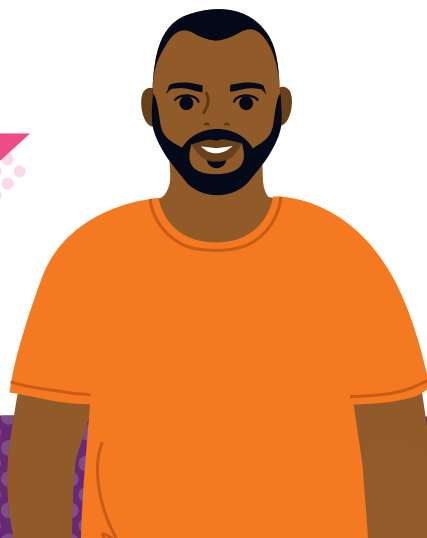
My child is struggling with body image issues due to puberty changes. How can I support them?



Puberty brings a lot of physical changes and with them expectations about the perfect body and pressure to conform to ideals about body size and shape. The influence of social media – including images that are often altered and not real- can increase the pressure that your child or adolescent feels to look a certain way. Reassure your child that everyone goes through physical changes during puberty and that it's a natural part of growing up.

Explain that changes can happen slowly, and everyone will be experiencing changes at different times. Remind them that everyone is discovering their own identity and most people will have things they don't like about themselves. Encourage a positive body image by focusing on their strengths and unique qualities.

Discuss the importance of a healthy lifestyle and self-care rather than pursuing unrealistic ideals and help them celebrate their best selves.



9

How can I help my child cope with bullying and peer pressure?



During puberty and adolescence, emotions and relationships shift and change. Friends and peers often compete and want to assert themselves which can lead to friendship problems, peer pressure and bullying. This can take place physically or online.

It is important that you have open communication with your child about their friendships and experiences and reassure them that their feelings are valid. Teach them about identifying **healthy relationships** versus unhealthy ones and how to assert themselves in uncomfortable situations. Encourage them to surround themselves with supportive and respectful friends who share their values. Peers can be a positive influence promoting healthy decision making and providing support, but peers can also pressurise, manipulate and persuade adolescents to do things they don't want to, but feel they should, to fit in.



Talk to your child about the people that make them feel good and supported. Help them understand and manage difficult relationships or friends that aren't protecting and supporting them.



10

I discovered a condom in my child's bag. How should I handle this situation?



Firstly, it's important that you recognise that your child has taken responsibility for being prepared and has made a wise decision about looking after themselves and any partner. Remember, just because they have a condom, doesn't mean they are having sex but they are informed and prepared!

It is important that when you discuss this that they don't feel you are angry but that you are supportive and approachable so that they are comfortable to explain things and to ask you questions.

Opening up a conversation where they aren't made to feel ashamed will mean you have the opportunity to reinforce safe sex practices, consent, and healthy relationships. Congratulate them for taking precautions and ask if they have questions or need other information or services, including contraception.

It is good to remember that girls can carry condoms too and also make the same healthy choices to protect themselves and their partners.



11

My child is obsessed with music videos all about gangs or that have sexually explicit lyrics. How can I stop them?



In every generation there has been music that is considered dangerous and inappropriate for children and adolescents, but music is also a powerful connector for people and part of how they understand and talk about the world. It can be shocking to realise that your child is listening to content with explicit lyrics or stories that references sex, drugs and violence. However, punishing them or shutting things down will not help.



You need to be able to talk to your child about why they are interested in this music and create a space where you can ask questions and share your thoughts and feelings. Watching this content may be the way your child tries to fit in and they may not have thought about what they really feel. Challenge them in a positive way on the issues you are uncomfortable with, by asking questions or explaining how it makes you feel.

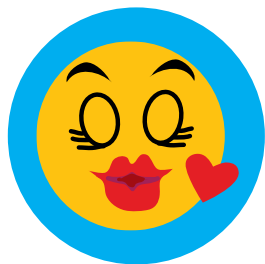
You can raise issues around the way women are discussed, or the way violence is made exciting and what message that gives. Keep the discussion going, don't forbid it as this will just encourage them to hide their viewing or make them more reluctant to talk to you.

Use the opportunities you have to bring it up and ask questions around the lyrics and content. This is much more likely to encourage them to see different perspectives and become more aware of what their choices mean.



12

I'm worried about the influence of social media on my child, what can I do?



Social media plays an important role in most adolescent's lives and connecting online can help them to make new friends. But social media also brings challenges and risks. As parents and caregivers, it's important to help our children to manage these and stay safe. Reassure them that they can always talk to you if they are worried about anything that they see, or messages that they receive online.



Many adults are less familiar with social media and so worry about it being harmful. Talk to your child and ask them to share their experience on social media and the sites and apps they use. The more you can learn and understand the better you can support them.

Most social media sites have age restrictions, so make sure that you're aware of these and you help your child understand why they are there. If you can, use parental controls to block harmful content and make sure that your child understands the importance of staying safe online. This means not sharing any personal information – for example about where they live or which school they go to.



For children and younger adolescents:

Agree on time limits on your child's screen

time and think about restricting their use to shared spaces so that you can check the content that they're accessing.



For older adolescents:

Encourage them to be responsible about the content that they share

online. They need to remember that once images or messages are shared online, they lose control over who sees them.

A good rule is to pause before sharing and to think about how they would feel if an older relative saw the message? If they wouldn't want them to see it, don't send it!



13

My son has just broken up with his girlfriend and is heartbroken; how can I help?



Relationships during adolescence can be very intense and involve deep emotions. First loves can feel like they will last forever, and it can feel heartbreaking when they end. Try to encourage your son to open up about how he is feeling and reassure him that it is normal to feel sad and upset after a relationship ends.

Talking about his feelings can help him to begin to work through emotions. Encourage him to take care of himself. Going out with friends, getting exercise and keeping active can help to take his mind off things and start to feel better.



If the sadness continues and you are worried that he may be depressed, go with him to the clinic to get help.

14

I think my child has been sexually abused by someone. What should I do?



If you are worried that your child has been/may be being sexually abused, it's really important to talk to them about this and find out. Choose the time and place to have this conversation carefully. Try to make sure that it's somewhere the child feels safe, comfortable and relaxed. Explain to them that you want to check that they are ok because you feel something might be wrong. Reassure them that they can tell you anything and that they won't be in any trouble. It is important that you are not going to be shocked or emotional about what they might say.



You could ask them:

"Has anything happened that has made you feel bad?"

"Has anyone done anything that has made you feel sad or uncomfortable?"

"Has anyone tried to touch you or hurt you?"



Your child may feel scared to disclose, they may have been threatened. If they don't share, make sure they know that anything they want to talk about, you are always ready to speak. Evidence shows that it can take a very long time for people to be able to talk about abuse.



When a child does talk, make sure they know that they are not in trouble and that any abuse is not their fault and they have done the right thing by talking about it.



Reassure your child that you believe them and let them know that you will help them and make sure that the abuse stops. Tell them that you are going to talk to someone who can help.

Depending on who is carrying out the abuse, it may be important to move the child to a safe place before reporting the abuse. It will also be important for them to be seen by a doctor or other health professional as soon as possible



For more information and support see the 'Further information' page at the end of this guide.

15

My daughter is pregnant/my son has got a girl pregnant, I don't know what to do?



Finding out that your daughter is pregnant/your son got a girl pregnant can often come as a shock to parents, especially if you didn't know that they were having sex. Try to remain calm – losing your temper won't help. Reassure your son/daughter that you are here for them and will help them to think through their options and manage the situation together.

You need to understand how she is feeling and whether this was something she planned or is as a result of any abuse. You may also want to consider seeing a health professional to confirm the pregnancy and to follow up on issues relating to HIV or STI risk.



It might be helpful for you all to meet with the girl/ boy and their parents to discuss together what the girl's choices are. It is great if you can offer advice and support to your child that empowers them.

An unintended pregnancy can be difficult for the boy involved, but it is important that he respects her decisions and accepts his shared responsibility for the pregnancy. In some places if the adolescents involved are under the age of consent there could be other consequences you need to consider where there is involvement of the police or social welfare services.

16

Should I give my child the HPV vaccination?



Vaccinating your child against HPV is really important as it reduces the risk of cervical cancer and other cancers. Most cases of HPV are harmless, but because we don't know who's at risk of going on to develop cancer, it's important that everyone has the HPV vaccination, especially girls and young women, and also adolescents living with HIV.

Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer affecting women in Eastern and Southern Africa, but it is something that can be prevented with a safe and effective vaccine.

Research shows that between 9-14 years- is the best age to have the HPV vaccination, before they start having sex. This means that the vaccine can help the body to build up resistance to protect from HPV before a person starts having sex and are exposed to the virus. The vaccine is being used all over the world to prevent the spread of the HPV virus. Since 2006, over 80 million people in 121 countries have been vaccinated.

It's also important your child understands the importance of the HPV vaccine. This is a helpful explanation aimed at adolescents. See the ['HPV' Q&A guide](#) for more information.



17

How do I tell my child they are living with HIV and when should I do it?



Telling your child, they have HIV, is a difficult but important conversation to help your child understand and manage **living with HIV**.

Research shows that children who are told early on about their HIV status do better in managing their condition and are better at taking their treatment every day. It is recommended that children know their HIV status by the age of 9.



Leaving the discussion to when a child is in their teens has been

shown to lead to greater anxiety and stress and hiding their status from them can impact how well they take their medication.



Health professionals can help you plan the conversation and support you to practice how to talk to your child or they can support you in the conversation. It is important to find a comfortable place to talk and that you have the time to discuss without interruptions.



The most important thing is to be honest and open and to use simple language to explain what HIV is and how it affects their body. This is not a one-off conversation it is something you will return to so use language that is suitable for your child. You can develop their understanding over time and help them think through who they tell and when and how to tell others.

It is important you reassure them it is not their fault and reassure them that taking treatment to control the virus can support them to live a full, happy and healthy life. Remind your child that you're there to support them every step of the way. Let them know they can talk to you whenever they need to.

Remember, telling your child about their HIV status is a process, not a one-time event. Be patient with yourself and your child as you navigate this journey together.



Further information and contact details

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