

# How to Discuss Sexual Topics with Your Children

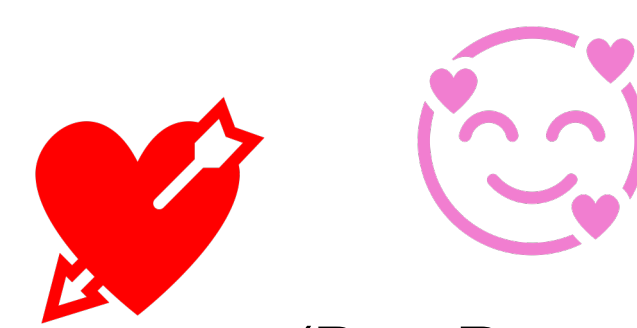
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## When do youth start dating and become sexually active?

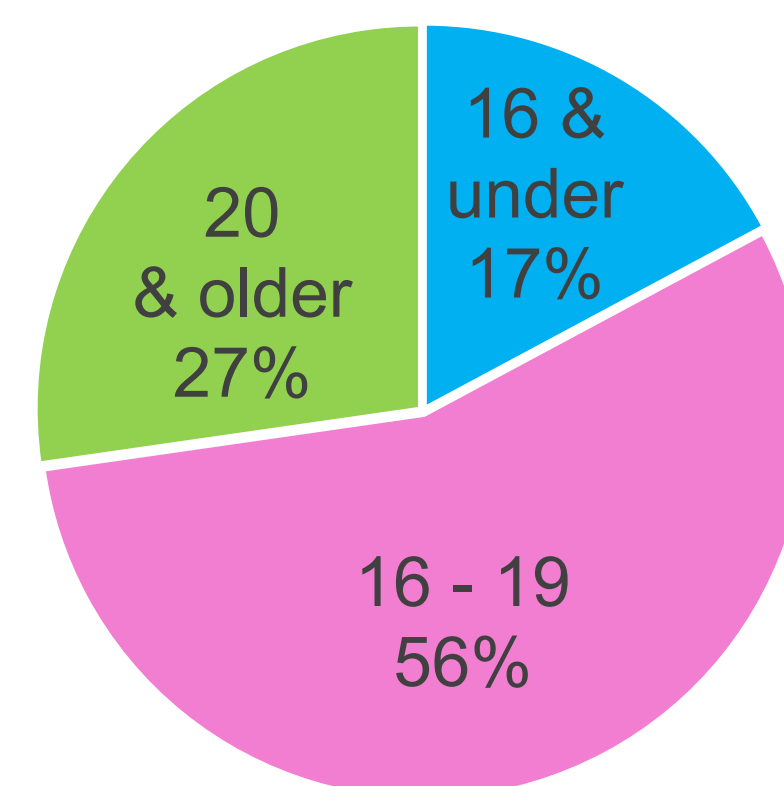
Percentage of youth who reported that they previously had or were currently in a romantic relationship

- 20% of 13-14 year olds
- 44% of 15-17 year olds



(Pew Research Centre, 2013 - 2014)

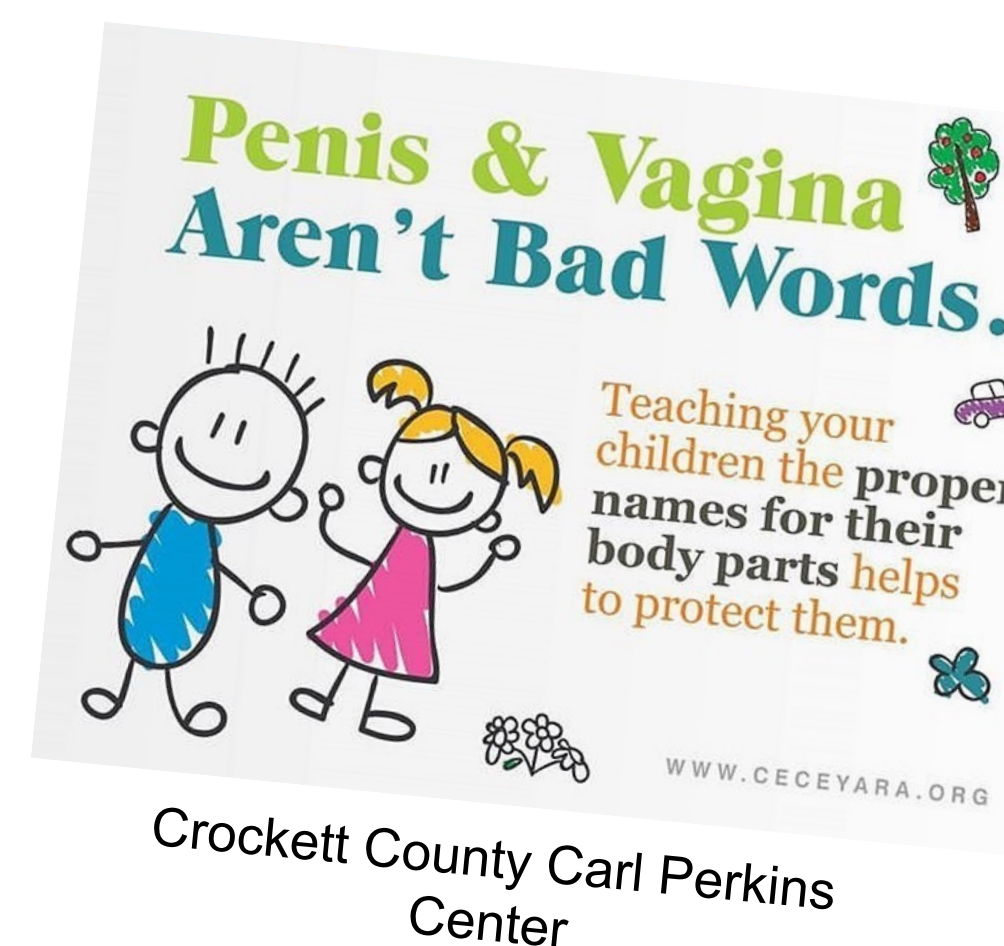
Reported age of first sexual intercourse



(Statistics Canada, 2015 - 2016)

## At what age should I start discussing sexual topics with my child?

- You can start teaching children anatomically correct names for sex organs around age 2 (e.g., "people with penises") and the mechanics of sex at ages 6-8
  - Having this common language is useful when teaching kids about sexual abuse and identifying sex organs as private (Walsh & Brandon, 2012) and may increase children's body pride
  - If children have experienced sexual abuse, they may be reluctant to discuss it without the vocabulary to do so (Wurtele, 1987)
- If not started earlier, initiate these conversations during your child's pre-teen years when they are starting puberty (~ages 9-13) to help explain their changing bodies (US Dept of Health and Human Services)



## Will discussing sexual topics with my teen make them more likely to engage in sexual activities?

**Short answer:** More than likely, no!

**Long answer:** Research suggests that communication between parents and children about sexual practices affects adolescents' decisions about sexual activities

- Delayed sexual activities (Karofsky et al., 2000), more likely to use condoms if they do have sex (Miller et al., 1998; Patel et al., 2021; Weinman et al., 2008) and have higher self-efficacy to refuse sex (DiClemente et al. 2001)

**9 / 10** Teens said that it would be easier to delay sexual activity & teen pregnancy if they could have more open, honest discussions about sexual topics with parents

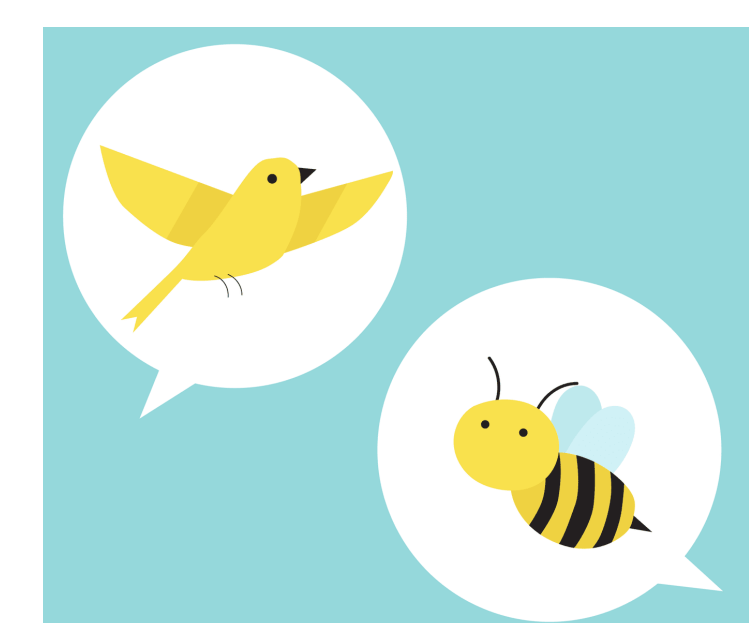
## Is it normal to feel awkward approaching my teen with these conversation topics?

**Short answer:** Yes, but that's okay!

**Long answer:** Most parents feel at least a bit of discomfort approaching conversations about sexual topics and may have anxiety around:

- Not knowing the answers and providing more information than your child is ready for

But....



**Starting these conversations (e.g., anatomy and consent) in early childhood makes youth and parents more comfortable with discussions of sexual activities during adolescence (CDC; Today's Parent). More frequent conversations can better facilitate your teen's ability to remember the content (Aschcraft & Murray, 2018)**

## What are the main topics to cover in these conversations?

### Proper terms for Anatomy/Physiology

- > This learning should start in childhood
- > Euphemisms may convey the message that sexual organs are shameful/must be kept secret

### Puberty

- > Explain changes that will occur in their appearance, body and feelings (girls should learn about menstruation and breast development & boys should learn about facial hair and that penises and testicles will grow larger)

### Masturbation

- > Communicate that masturbation is normal and can provide a sexual outlet that doesn't pose risks of pregnancy or STIs. Parents should explain that there are appropriate times and locations for this

### Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and HIV

- > Discuss risk factors (e.g., low condom use)
- > Discuss the importance of using protection (e.g., condoms) during other sex acts as well (oral and anal sex) to reduce likelihood of STIs
- > Encourage and facilitate regular appointments with family doctor

### Abstinence & Contraceptives

- > Provide info about contraceptives (e.g., intrauterine device, subdermal implant, vaginal ring, condoms, birth control)
- > There's no evidence that adolescents who are taught abstinence as the only contraceptive are less likely to have sex (Trenholm et al., 2007)

### Gender and Sexual Orientation

- > It is recommended that parents seek further information about gender identity, biological sex, and sexual orientation (if they feel it's necessary) and be honest if they do not know the answer

### Sexual Abuse/Exploitation

- > Parents should explain that most sexual abusers are known (not strangers)
- > Parents should emphasize adolescents' rights to say "no" to sexual advances and to control who touches their body

### Romantic Relationships

- > Discuss expectations about how/why they can start dating
- > Inform them about the whirlwind of emotions they are likely to experience and that this can sometimes impair one's judgement
- > Discuss heterosexual and homosexual relationships



(Aschcraft & Murray, 2018; CDC; US Dept of Health and Human Services)

## How do I approach these conversations?

- Encourage them to ask questions and provide honest answers (CDC)
- Young adults reported that conversations were most helpful when parents were open, honest, realistic, non-judgmental, and were not forceful of their own values (Pariera & Brody, 2018)



## Where to have these discussions?

- **In the car** where there is no pressure to make eye contact
- Following or during **TV shows/movies** which includes sexual content and issues (provides an opportunity to reinforce positive sexual behaviour and discuss repercussions of risky sexual behaviour)
- Through **texting** (CDC; Verywell Mind)



## Should I talk to my children about digital sexual behaviour?

- Between 2.5-24% of youth aged 12-25 have reported engaging in "sexting" (sending and/or receiving messages of a sexual nature, including videos, pictures, and written text) (Kosenko et al., 2017)
- Only 40% of adolescents report discussing sexting with their parents (Widman et al., 2021)
- Parents reported self-efficacy (e.g., sense of confidence in their ability to conduct these conversations) were related to higher quality discussions about sexting, signifying the importance of parents' seeking out information for their own learning prior to these conversations (Dolev-Cohen & Ricon, 2022)



## Take home messages

- **Parent-child communication about sexual issues plays an important role in adolescents' decisions in this domain and protect against negative health outcomes**
- **Parents can start conversations about anatomy as early as age 2 and at the latest, should start discussing sexual issues when children are experiencing puberty (ages 9-13)**
- **Frequent conversations have many benefits (e.g., easier for teen to remember content)**
- **Be informed about digital sexual behaviour and discuss this**
- **Convey an open, honest, and non-judgmental attitude during these conversations**

## Resources to acquire more information

- KidsHealth.org, YoungMensHealthSite.org, YoungWomensHealth.org,
- <https://www.mottchildren.org/posts/your-child/contraception-for-teens>
- <https://transstudent.org/gender/>
- <https://health.gov/myhealthfinder/healthy-living/sexual-health/talk-your-kids-about-sex-and-healthy-relationships>
- AdvocatesForYouth.org
- [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/factsheets/talking\\_teens.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/factsheets/talking_teens.htm)