

# Families Are Talking

This issue of *Families Are Talking* includes information about the important role that parents and caregivers play in postponing sexual involvement; adolescent sexual activity; how people define abstinence; talking tips and messages to share with young people; what children are learning about abstinence in school; and an activity that parents and caregivers can use to talk with teens about this important issue.

## It's Important to Talk about Abstinence

Many parents and caregivers worry that talking with their kids about sex and contraception will encourage them to have sexual intercourse. But the truth is that many young people feel pressure to have sex, and say that having conversations with their parents and caregivers will make it easier for them to postpone sexual activity. Clearly communicating your family values and beliefs about abstinence can help your kids postpone sexual involvement. Also, if you talk with your children about contraception, they will be more likely to use it when they do become sexually active. So, talk soon, talk often, and talk again. Share your values and beliefs and stay involved in their lives, guiding them as they make choices that can affect their future.

### Adolescent Sexual Activity

Today, more young people are having sexual intercourse at earlier ages than in the past.<sup>1</sup> And, while there are almost as many young people that have had sexual intercourse as those that have not,<sup>2</sup> many young people who consider themselves “virgins” still engage in sexual behaviors that can put them at risk for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

According to the *National Survey of Adolescents and Young Adults*, of adolescents 15 to 17 who have not had sexual intercourse<sup>3</sup>:

- 30% have “been with someone in an intimate or sexual way”
- 13% have had oral sex

Whether or not you think your children are sexually active, it's important for them to know that certain behaviors—including oral sex—can put them at risk for STDs. It is also important for them to know how to prevent an unintended pregnancy, even if they won't actually use the information until later in their life.

### What Does It Mean to Be Abstinent?

Abstinence is a conscious decision to avoid certain activities or behaviors. When talking about sex, abstinence can have many different meanings. For some, it means not having any type of physical contact. For others, it means not having sexual intercourse (oral, vaginal, or anal). Yet, it can also mean not having vaginal intercourse but engaging in other sexual activities. Culture, religion, traditions, the media, peers, as well as family and personal values all play a role in how a person defines abstinence and decides whether or not to be abstinent.

As parents and caregivers, it is very important to be clear about your personal and family values, and to be able to communicate them to your children. What definition of abstinence do you want to share with your children? Here are a few definitions that you can consider:

In our family, abstinence means:

- ☐ Not engaging in any sexual behavior.
- ☐ Not engaging in any sexual behavior except kissing, holding hands, and hugging.
- ☐ Not engaging in oral, vaginal, or anal sex, but caressing and touching are ok.
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Sources

1. *14 and Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents* (Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2003).
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States 2001,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, vol. 51, no. SS-4, June 28, 2002.
3. *National Survey of Adolescents and Young Adults: Sexual Health Knowledge, Attitudes and Experiences* (Menlo Park, CA: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003).

## Tips to Help Parents and Caregivers Talk with Their Children

- Do not wait until your children ask questions
- Know and practice the messages that you want to share
- Seek “teachable moments”—daily opportunities that occur when you are with your children—that make it easy to share your messages and values
- Let your children know that you are open to talking with them about these important issues
- Listen
- Try to understand your children’s point of view
- Provide pamphlets, books, and other age-appropriate, medically accurate materials
- If you don’t know how to answer your children’s questions, offer to find the answers or look them up together
- Find out what your children’s schools are teaching about these topics
- Stay actively involved in your children’s lives
- Help your children plan for their future

# Sharing Messages with YOUR CHILDREN During “Teachable Moments”

You may not feel comfortable or think it’s appropriate to discuss abstinence from sexual activity with your young children. But, by beginning to talk with your children when they are young, you will help lay the foundation for them to develop the skills they need to make healthy decisions, become assertive, and resist peer pressure as they get older. If your children are already in their adolescent years and you’ve never had these conversations, realize that it’s never too late to start.

Before talking with your children, it’s helpful to consider the messages you want to share. Perhaps you want to share the following messages, using simple, clear, age-appropriate language.

For messages about dating, love, assertiveness, sexual behavior, contraception, and other topics, download the *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten–12th Grade* at [www.siecus.org/pubs/guidelines/guidelines.pdf](http://www.siecus.org/pubs/guidelines/guidelines.pdf)

## Messages for Young People Age Five through Eight:

### About Values

- Values are strong feelings or beliefs about important issues
- Individuals and families have different values

### About Decision-making

- Everybody has to make decisions
- Small children make many decisions such as what clothes to wear, toys to

play with, or who to have as friends

- All decisions have consequences
- Children need help from adults to make some decisions

## Messages for Young People Age Nine through 12:

### About Values

- Values help people decide how to behave and interact with others
- Most parents want their children to develop values similar to their values

bad, and choose the action that one believes will have the best outcome

- Individuals are responsible for the consequences of their decisions
- Family members can help with important decisions
- Friends often try to influence each other’s decisions
- People make decisions in different ways: by impulse,

by making the same decision friends make, by putting off making a decision, by letting someone else decide, and by testing the choices

### About Sexual Abstinence

- Intercourse is a pleasurable activity for most adults
- Children are not ready for sexual intercourse



## Messages for Young People Age 12 through 15

### About Values

- Values are an important part of people's lives
- Exploring one's values can be confusing
- Sometimes the values one learns in society conflict with the values one has learned in one's family
- People who try to behave according to their values feel good about themselves
- Values influence a person's most important decisions about friends, sexual relationships, family, education, work, and money

### About Decision-making

- People should carefully evaluate the consequences, advantages and disadvantages of each possible choice when they make a major decision
- To make wise decisions, people need accurate information about each choice
- Once a decision is made, there may be barriers to implementing the decision

- Evaluating past decisions can help individuals learn from their experiences and not repeat mistakes
- Decisions about sexuality are sometimes difficult because of sexual feelings and pressure from the partner and peers
- Decisions about sexuality can affect one's future health and life plans
- Establishing sexual limits before one is in a sexual situation is wise
- Teenagers who decide to have sexual intercourse must also decide about pregnancy and STD/HIV prevention
- Alcohol and drugs often interfere with good decision-making
- Talking to a close friend, parent, other family member, religious leader, or counselor during the decision-making process can be helpful

### About Sexual Abstinence

- Young teenagers are not mature enough for a sexual

relationship that includes intercourse

- Abstinence from sexual intercourse is the best method to prevent pregnancy and STD/HIV
- Teenagers who date need to discuss sexual limits with their dating partner
- People need to respect the sexual limits set by their partners
- Teenagers in romantic relationships can express their feelings without engaging in sexual intercourse
- There are many ways to give and receive pleasure and not have intercourse
- Teenagers considering sexual intercourse should talk to a parent or other trusted adult about their decisions, contraception, and disease prevention
- Abstinence from intercourse has benefits for teenagers
- Teenagers who have had sexual intercourse can choose to be abstinent

## Messages for Young People Age 15 through 18

### About Values

- Having values different than one's family can be difficult
- A person may accept one's family values and not always agree with all of them
- Respecting the diversity of values and beliefs of other people is important

### About Decision-making

- Teenagers and adults make decisions that

result in positive and negative consequences

- Some decisions have legal implications
- Decisions about sexual relationships continue throughout life

### About Sexual Abstinence

- Many American teenagers have had sexual intercourse and many have not

- Sexual intercourse is not a way to achieve adulthood
- Teenagers in romantic relationships can express their sexual feelings without engaging in sexual intercourse
- Many adults experience periods of abstinence

## WHAT ARE YOUR CHILDREN LEARNING

about Abstinence in School?

Are your children receiving comprehensive information about sexuality? That means that they learn about abstinence as well as an extensive list of other sexuality-related topics including decision-making, resisting peer pressure, assertiveness skills, and information about reproductive health and contraception. Or are they learning that abstinence is the only acceptable behavior; without learning critical information about contraception and disease prevention that they will need when they become sexually active in the future?

Find out what your children may or may not be learning in school so that you can provide or supplement that information at home:

- Ask your children what they are learning in school to find out if they are getting age-appropriate information about abstinence, decision-making, resisting peer pressure, assertiveness, reproductive health, and contraception
- Contact the teacher or principal and seek specific details about what the school teaches about these topics
- Ask to review the handouts, textbooks, and other materials that the school provides your children as well as the teacher's curriculum
- Advocate for young people to receive comprehensive sexuality education

For more information about advocating for sexuality education, read *Families Are Talking*, volume 2, number 1. For a free copy, visit [www.siecus.org/pubs/families/FAT\\_Newsletter\\_V2N1.pdf](http://www.siecus.org/pubs/families/FAT_Newsletter_V2N1.pdf) or call SIECUS at 212/819-9770, extension 303.

## FAMILIES ARE TALKING

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Tamara Kreinin, M.H.S.A.  
President & CEO

Monica Rodriguez  
Director of Information and Education

Amy Levine, M.A.  
Family Project Coordinator

Alan Barnett, Inc.  
Design and Layout

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### SIECUS

#### Family Project

130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350  
New York, NY 10036-7802  
Phone: 212/819-9770  
Fax: 212/819-9776

#### Policy Office

1706 R Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20009  
Phone: 202/265-2405  
Fax: 202/462-2340

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# An Activity for Parents and Caregivers to Communicate with Young People

It can be uncomfortable or embarrassing to have conversations with your kids about sexual activity—whether you want to talk about your family's values, dating, having sex, or any other related issue. But it's important to talk with your kids, letting them know you care about them and that you will be there for them through the good times and the difficult ones. You can start by making time to complete the activity with your teens. It will give you the opportunity to explore these important issues, and give them the chance to practice their decision-making and assertiveness skills.

## Theresa and Sam

Theresa and Sam have been dating for just over six months. They spend a lot of their free time together and think they have a special relationship. They are best friends. They trust each other. They tell each other everything.

When they first started dating, Sam's parents talked with him about their family values—that they feel it's important for Sam to abstain from intercourse until he's married. As Theresa and Sam's relationship got more serious, they decided that while they wouldn't have intercourse, they could engage in other sexual behaviors that do not put them at risk for sexually

transmitted diseases (if one of them was to be infected) or pregnancy.

Recently however, Theresa has felt a little bit jealous of her friends because some of them say they've had intercourse. Theresa feels she's ready to have sex and has started to put pressure on Sam. Both feeling confused, they decide to talk about their feelings. Theresa doesn't want to push Sam into doing something that he doesn't want to do. But she feels that as long as they're in love they shouldn't have to wait until marriage. Sam loves Theresa a lot, and worries that their relationship will change if they

have intercourse. He also wants to respect his family's values.

Sam is scared that Theresa will break-up with him. He decides to talk with a friend who says, "I don't know why you're making such a big deal about this. Intercourse is great! That's why everyone does it!" Sam doesn't really believe his friend's comment that everyone is doing it. But sometimes he feels like he is the only one who's not. Sam is trying to decide whether or not he's ready to have sex and wants to talk with his parents about it, but he doesn't know what to say.

### Now, answer these questions together:

1. Describe one reason Sam might not want to have intercourse.
2. What are other reasons a person might not want to have intercourse?
3. What could Sam say to his parents to begin the conversation about whether or not to have sexual intercourse?
4. What could Sam's parents say to him that would make him feel comfortable talking to them so that they can guide him in his decision?
5. Who else might Sam be able to go to for advice?
6. Do you think Sam should have sexual intercourse with Theresa? Why or why not?
7. Based on your answer to number 6, what can Sam say to Theresa about his decision?
8. If Sam decides to wait, why would Theresa wait until Sam is ready?
9. Make a list of activities that Theresa and Sam can do to together to help them postpone sexual involvement.
10. What can Theresa do to help herself wait until Sam is ready?

Adapted from *Filling The Gaps: Hard to Teach Topics in Sexuality Education* (New York: SIECUS, 1998).

The following books from the *Perspectives on Healthy Sexuality Series* are for young people in grades 7 through 12: *Abstinence: Postponing Sexual Involvement*; *Dating and Sex: Defining and Setting Boundaries*; *Sexual Readiness: When Is It Right?*; and *Teen Sex: Risks and Consequences*. They provide straightforward, comprehensive information that can be used as a supplement to what young people learn at home and in school. Each book is \$18.95. To order call Capstone Press at 800/747-4992 or visit [www.capstonepress.com](http://www.capstonepress.com)