



CAROLINA SEXUAL  
WELLNESS CENTER

[www.carolinaswc.org](http://www.carolinaswc.org)

# How To Talk To Your Kids About Sex

An Age-Appropriate Sex Education Toolkit



**Expert Advice, Research, Conversation  
Prompts, Activities & More**

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# Introduction

Talking to kids about sex is an INFAMOUS conversation.

Birds, bees, storks, watermelon seeds... It seems like society can work double-time to misinform kids asking natural, curious questions.

Some parents and caregivers consider sex one of the hardest topics to broach with their kids, which is a reason why research shows they often delay conversations until they think their kids are already romantically involved. However, with what we understand about developmental psychology, a basic understanding of human sexuality begins in infancy.

So why do parents and caregivers dodge these important conversations? Usually, delays come down to the following.

## **Caregivers:**

- Feel like they have limited knowledge
- Think youth aren't ready for sex
- Feel discomfort around sex due to experience
- Continue demographic factors like race or religion
- Think they want to protect a child's innocence

While these are all valid concerns and factors, we at Carolina Sexual Wellness Center believe nurturing honest and appropriate conversations contributes to lifelong skills that serve families as they develop into mindful, unique individuals. That's why we've created this toolkit (among many others!) Our mission is dedicated to guiding you through sometimes awkward yet vastly rewarding conversations about sexual wellness, identity, and boundaries.



We've tailored this toolkit to each developmental stage, allowing parents to approach these topics confidently and effectively. Understanding how children process sexual content, how they may encounter it, and how to foster open communication is key to their growth.



# Early Childhood

## (ages 2-5)

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### Summary

#### ✓ Teach Body Autonomy

Help children understand that they are in control of their own bodies. Teach them that they have the right to say "no" to any touch they are uncomfortable with.

- Ex: If a child doesn't want to hug a relative, support their decision and reinforce that it's okay to choose how they want to express affection.

#### ✓ Introduce Consent in Simple Terms

Consent can be introduced through everyday interactions, such as asking for permission before giving a hug or sharing a toy. Use language like, "We ask before we touch someone's body."

- Ex: If a child wants to tickle a sibling, remind them to ask first, and explain that a sibling can say "stop" if they don't like it.

#### ✓ Correct Anatomical Terms

Start teaching children the correct names for body parts (penis, vagina, vulva). This normalizes their understanding of bodies and removes shame from the conversation.

- Ex: Instead of using euphemisms like "private parts," clearly say, "That's your vulva, and it's a special part of your body."

#### ✓ Establish Boundaries

Teach children about private and public spaces and that certain areas of their body are private.

- Ex: Explain that the bathroom is a private space and that it's okay to knock before entering someone else's room.

# Boundaries

Children are naturally curious about their bodies and how they compare with others. (Bellybuttons, anyone?) Self-recognition and differentiation is a natural part of becoming self-aware, as well as internalizing that they occupy their own physical space. In fact, research informs us that there are five different stages of self-awareness, and they begin very early in life.

While every child is unique in their development, there are some major milestones researchers and development specialists agree on. For example, children ages 2 through 5 notice differences in anatomy, gender, and how people show affection. While they may not understand sexual concepts just yet, they're beginning to ask questions about these differences and expect answers!

Typically, this is because kids are paying very close attention to conversations happening around them as they navigate what it means to be themselves. As they gain social skills, they'll likely come across discussions about bodies during family time, in the media, or even while playing at school. This offers plenty of opportunities to explore boundaries in innocent ways as they learn about personal space..

Boundaries are foundational when it comes to roadmapping conversations around sex, and this age group usually starts to grasp the idea of personal space and may express discomfort when someone invades it. Parents can use these moments to teach the importance of bodily autonomy and consent in simple, relatable terms

Child Mind Institute does a wonderful job of outlining the importance of nurturing emotional and physical boundaries, how they're communicated, and how they should be respected during this formative time.

**Click on this video to learn  
5 Ways To Teach Kids  
About Boundaries!**



# What Kids 2-5 Typically Understand

Because kids at this age express an understanding of basic concepts about body parts and personal space, it's a perfect time to reinforce that they know their body belongs to them and that they have control over who touches them and how.

This is a great time to introduce the idea of asking for permission before any physical contact, like giving hugs or holding hands. It's also really important to listen to your child! If they say "no," let them know you hear them loud and clear. Respecting their boundaries helps them feel safe and in control!

## Things you can do right now to help with boundary navigation:

### 1 Own Your Space

Remind your child that your body belongs to you and that you get to decide who can touch it and how. Relate that to them:

- "If you need personal space, too, it's okay to ask for room!"
- "Remember, your body is all yours. If you don't want a hug, you can simply say, 'I don't want a hug right now.'"
- "This is my body, and I decide who gets to hug me!"

### 2 Ask Before Hugging

Introduce the idea of always asking for permission before giving a hug, holding hands, or any other form of physical contact. Other adults in their life can help here, too:

- Parent: "Whenever you want to give someone a hug, first ask politely. You might say, 'Can I give you a hug?'"
- Child: "Can I give you a hug?"
- Friend/Adult: "Yes, that's okay!" (or "No, thank you" if they don't want a hug.)

### 3 Listen & Respect

Emphasize that if they say "no," it means their feelings are important and must be respected. (Saying "no" is an incredibly important developmental stage, and while it can cause frustration, remember that they're practicing autonomy.)

[Here's how to deal with the "no" stage](#), by the way. You're welcome.)

### 4 Practice Through Play

Use fun, everyday moments or role-playing scenarios to reinforce these concepts in a way that's easy to understand and remember.

- Parent: "Let's practice together. Imagine we're playing at the park. I might say, 'Can I hold your hand as we walk?' and you can respond either 'Yes, please' or 'No, thank you.'"
- Child (role-playing): "Can I hold your hand?"
- Parent (role-playing): "No, thank you!"
- Parent: "See how easy it is to ask and to say no? Thank you for listening to me about what I don't want!"

# Where They May Encounter Sexual Content

While little ones aged 2 to 5 don't usually see explicit sexual content, they do notice affectionate moments that can spark their curiosity about relationships and bodies.

They might see **parents hugging, couples kissing, or friends holding hands** when they're out and about. These sweet displays can lead to lots of questions about feelings and what physical touch means, research shows.



Kids also see affection in **their favorite shows and animated movies.** You know how cartoon characters love to hug and play together? Scenes where they express love and friendship can catch a child's eye and get them thinking about how people connect. Even something as simple as different character outfits can inspire questions about how bodies look and how people express themselves.

**Family time is another big opportunity to learn.** When kids see family members showing love through hugs, tickle fights, or cozy cuddle sessions, it can prompt all kinds of questions about why we act the way we do. This is a perfect time for parents to jump in and chat about feelings, boundaries, and respecting personal space

## Example:

Why is Grandma hugging me so tightly?

Grandma hugs because she loves you very much. Hugs are one way of showing love and care. Remember, you can always decide if you want a hug or if you need a little space.



**Kids ages 2 to 5 might also notice different ways people express affection at community events or family gatherings.** Watching how friends and family interact helps them learn about social cues. When these moments happen, it's so helpful for parents to stay open and ready to answer questions; these encounters, parents can guide their little ones in understanding feelings, relationships, and the importance of consent, all in a fun and age-appropriate way that builds respect and empathy. Need support in addressing third-party affection? [Kennedy Krieger guidance helps illustrate conversations around affection](#), as well as noting how children with developmental disabilities may need contextual framing.

## How To Prepare Them

Talking about body parts and the idea of consent with kids ages 2 to 5 helps them understand their bodies and set healthy boundaries right from the start, among many additional benefits. One easy way to get started is by using the correct names for body parts during everyday chats. **For example, during diaper changes or bath time, using words like “vulva” and “penis” instead of cutesy names makes it feel normal and reduces any awkwardness.** This way, kids get comfy discussing their bodies, and it helps them know these parts are just as natural as any other, especially during times of curiosity and “public’ vs. “private”!

Everyday situations are also a great chance to chat about consent. For example, when siblings are playing, parents can remind them to ask each other before tickling or sharing toys. This reinforces that consent isn't just for adults; it's part of friendships, too!

**Creating a space where kids feel comfortable talking about their bodies is vastly important.**

Encouraging them to share their thoughts and feelings helps build trust. Parents can ask open-ended questions like, “What do you think about that hug?” or “How does it feel when someone touches your arm?” These kinds of questions get kids talking and help them understand their own comfort levels.



By keeping the conversation open and inviting, parents lay a solid foundation for understanding personal boundaries that kids will carry with them as they grow up. It's all about making these discussions fun, approachable, and totally normal!



# Middle Childhood

## (ages 6-9)

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### Summary

#### ✓ Personal Boundaries

Reinforce the importance of personal boundaries and bodily autonomy, explaining that everyone has the right to set their own limits. This includes the concept of privacy, such as knocking on doors before entering.

- Ex: If a child barges into the bathroom, gently remind them about privacy and the importance of respecting personal space.

#### ✓ Basic Understanding of Sexual Health

Begin introducing basic concepts of puberty and how bodies change, explaining that these changes are normal and happen to everyone.

- Ex: If a child asks about where babies come from, provide a simple, factual explanation: “Babies grow in a special place inside the mother called the uterus.”

#### ✓ Respect for Others’ Boundaries

Encourage children to respect others' personal space and ask permission before engaging in physical contact, like giving a high-five or holding hands.

- Ex: “It’s important to check if your friend wants to hold hands before doing it. Not everyone feels the same about touch.”

#### ✓ Handling Questions

Create an open environment where children feel comfortable asking questions about their bodies and relationships. It’s also important to stick to clarity, answering the questions your children are specifically asking rather than over-informing. Sometimes, it can be best to address and stop before explaining things in greater detail than they may understand.



Ah, middle childhood—what a time to be alive. Many of us remember the first time we heard about sex from unreliable sources at school or on the playground, leaving us confused or plainly “grossed out.”

A new study by Montclair State University professors Eva Goldfarb and Lisa Lieberman shows comprehensive sex education can prevent child sex abuse and intimate partner violence, increase appreciation for sexual diversity and improve environments for LGBTQ students, among other benefits.

The research is the most extensive body of work to date that shows comprehensive sex education should begin as early as kindergarten.

During these years, kids start to get really curious about how their bodies work and how they change as they grow. Topics in school begin to incorporate scientific and biological information, which when divided from sex education, might leave kids coming to their own conclusions.

While younger age groups can talk about the foundational aspects around interpersonal relationships and self, middle childhood is important for building on what they’ve already learned about bodies, consent, and respect. This isn’t an outrageous idea—in fact, recent studies show that 50% of parents believe sex education should begin as early as kindergarten with heavy parental engagement.

# What They Understand

**Between 6 and 9 years old, children become little explorers, eager to learn about the world around them, including bodies, identities, and relationships.** They start to notice that people come in all shapes, sizes, and colors, and they can recognize that differences are what make us all unique. It's a wonderful time for parents to encourage curiosity and help their kids embrace diversity!

As they explore these concepts, kids might start asking some pretty big questions. They may wonder, "How are babies made?" or "Why do people say boys can't wear dresses?" These questions are completely normal and show that this age range is starting to think about gender roles, how they fit into society based on what others are expressing, and the differences between people. When kids ask these types of questions, it's a great opportunity for parents to respond thoughtfully and supportively.

## Tackling The Nitty-Gritty About Sex & Gender

When explaining how babies are made, parents can use age-appropriate language that doesn't overinform, but empowers kids to ask questions and feel safe with their adults. **It's perfectly fine to start with simple facts about where babies grow, such as the uterus, while being open to more questions as kids get older and more curious.** This way, kids feel comfortable seeking information and know they can talk to their parents about anything, big or small.

### Need Some Support?

Planned Parenthood has an excellent guide with elementary-aged conversation prompts, how to relay scientific information, and how to dispel misunderstandings.



# Age-Appropriate Responses for Commonly Asked Questions

## **Where do babies come from?**

A baby grows in a mother's belly and comes out of her vagina.

## **How does the baby get in the mother's belly?**

Most women have tiny eggs in a special part of their belly. Most men have very tiny seeds, called sperm. Sometimes, when two grownups have sex together, one grownup's penis goes into the other's vagina. They can make a baby if a seed and egg meet.

## **What if I don't want to have a baby?**

Some people become parents and some don't. It's a personal choice and having a baby is a BIG responsibility. There are things people use or medicines they can take if they don't want to have a baby right now.

## **Why does my body look different from theirs?**

### **Why don't I have a penis/vulva?**

Some bodies have a penis, some have a vulva, and some look different in other ways. Everyone's body is made a little differently.

**Remember:** You want to answer honestly, but young children don't need much detail. If they want more information, they'll probably let you know. As they get older, you can gradually add more details!

# Fostering Conversation

Talking with kids about their bodies and consent can be really fun, and you can get to know your kid's personality in ways that intentional conversations can!

The Mother Company offers an excellent music video that you can watch together to discuss and explore.

Plus, the tune is catchy!

Parents can use materials like this to get kids sharing their thoughts and feelings. This kind of chatting not only helps kids express themselves but also gives them a chance to understand consent in their own way.



As children learn about differences in treatment based on gender, it's helpful for parents to address any unfairness they observe, or the objective reality that there truly aren't toys that are only appropriate for specific genders.



For example, if a child notices that boys and girls are often given different toys or activities, parents can use these moments to discuss equality and fairness. They might say, "It's great to like what you like, whether that's playing with trucks or dolls! There are no girls' or boys' toys. There are only toys and everyone should be able to play with what makes them happy."

By discussing how people might feel when they're treated differently because of their identity, kids can learn to be more understanding and supportive of their friends. **This encourages a sense of community and belonging, reminding kids that everyone has something valuable to contribute, no matter their background or identity.**

# Where They May Encounter Sexual Content

As kids grow into the ages of 6 to 9, they become even more curious about the world around them. This curiosity can lead them to encounter various types of content in their everyday lives—especially as they begin to explore TV shows, movies, video games, and online platforms. Many of these sources are filled with all sorts of stories about relationships, bodies, and sometimes even topics that may not be age-appropriate. ([Common Sense Media is a great resource to help gauge topics presented in specific movies and TV programs.](#))

## 1. Television & Movies

In the realm of television and movies, children might see characters expressing affection, sometimes through kisses or hugs. While these moments can seem innocent, they might raise questions about feelings and relationships. Parents can take advantage of these scenes to initiate conversations.

- For instance, if a child sees a couple kiss on a show, parents could ask, “What do you think about that? How do you think those characters feel?” This helps kids articulate their thoughts while giving parents a chance to share their views on healthy relationships.
- When watching TV shows or movies together, use these moments as teachable opportunities. After an episode, ask questions like, “How do you think those characters treated each other? Did they show kindness?” This helps children process what they’ve seen and develop critical thinking skills around media portrayals.

## 2. Friends & Peers

Children might start hearing their friends talk about things they’ve seen online or in other media. This chatter can include everything from jokes to discussions about crushes or more explicit content. If children come home with questions sparked by their friends’ conversations, it’s important for parents to be prepared. Having an open-door policy where kids feel safe asking questions can go a long way!

- For example, parents can encourage this by saying things like, “If you ever hear something you don’t understand or feel confused about, I’m here to help you figure it out.”

## 3. The Internet

The internet is another area where children can stumble upon content that’s not suitable for their age, and kids can come across videos that may contain sexualized imagery or themes. [It’s vital for parents to monitor their child’s media consumption and talk about internet safety.](#) Parents can explain that not everything online is meant for kids and that it’s always okay to come to them if something seems strange or uncomfortable.



# How To Prepare Them

At this stage of development, it's essential for parents to lay a solid foundation for their children regarding bodies, relationships, and respect. Kids are naturally curious and may start asking questions about where babies come from and why people are different, so it's a great time to share accurate information in a way that's clear and relatable.

- ✔ **Begin by ensuring that your child understands the basics of human anatomy** using the correct terms for body parts. You might say, “Babies grow in a special place inside the mother called the uterus, and everyone has a penis or vulva, depending on how their body is made.” Using these terms in everyday conversations can help normalize them and reduce any potential embarrassment about discussing bodies.
- ✔ **As your child starts forming friendships and social connections**, it's crucial to talk about boundaries and respectful behavior toward others. Explain that everyone has the right to decide who can touch them and how, just like they have the right to choose who can touch their own body.
  - For example, you can say, “Your body is yours, and you get to decide who gives you hugs or high-fives. And it’s just as important to ask your friends what they’re comfortable with, too.” This reinforces the idea of mutual respect in friendships.
- ✔ **As children navigate their social circles, they may also start exploring the dynamics of relationships**, whether that’s friendships or crushes. Use everyday situations to spark conversations about feelings and interactions.
  - For example, if you hear your child talking about a friend they like, ask, “What do you like about that friend?” or “How do you feel when you’re playing together?” This encourages them to express their emotions and think about how relationships work.
- ✔ **It's also important to explain the concept of privacy and personal space.** Kids should understand that knocking on a closed door before entering is a way to respect someone’s privacy.
  - For example, you can remind them, “Just like you want your own space respected, it’s important to give others their space, too.” Reinforcing these habits early helps children grow into respectful individuals who value boundaries in their relationships.



# Pre-adolescence

## (ages 10-12)

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### Summary

#### ✓ Understanding Puberty

Provide detailed information about the physical and emotional changes that occur during puberty. Encourage questions and address any concerns they may have.

- Example: “During puberty, your body will change in many ways, such as growing taller and developing body hair. These changes are normal and a sign that you’re becoming an adult.”

#### ✓ Emotional Aspects of Relationships

Discuss the emotional components of relationships, including friendship, crushes, and the importance of mutual respect.

- Example: “Having a crush is a natural part of growing up. It’s important to treat everyone with kindness and respect, and to communicate openly about your feelings.”

#### ✓ Digital Consent & Safety

Introduce the concept of digital consent, emphasizing respectful communication online and the importance of privacy.

- Example: “Before sharing someone’s photo or information online, always ask for their permission. Respecting others’ privacy is just as important online as it is in person.”

#### ✓ Media Literacy

Teach children to critically evaluate the messages they receive from media about sex and relationships.

- Example: “Not everything you see on TV or online is accurate. It’s important to think about what you see and ask questions if something doesn’t make sense.”

# Pre-adolescence



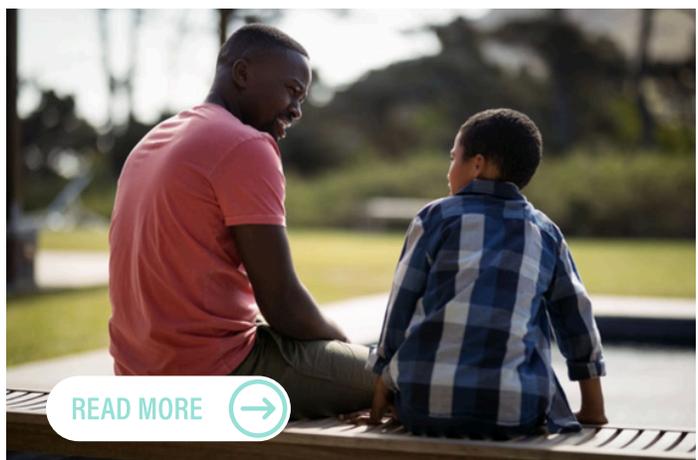
As children approach their teenage years, their understanding of relationships and sexuality becomes more sophisticated! After all, this “tween” period marks the beginning of puberty for the average kid.

They are likely to be curious about the changes happening to their bodies and those of their peers, and their exposure to sexual content increases. They may begin to feel more embarrassed or self-conscious about discussing it!

As U.S. News notes, the tween years could be the hardest. According to researchers who studied mothers’ adjustment to the different stages of children’s development, it’s a crucial time where parental figures may be intimidated by the growing complexity of their tween’s social and personal lives.

**Need help talking to your kids about puberty?**

**Here’s a detailed and clear conversation roadmap from Children’s Health!**



[READ MORE](#) 

## What is puberty?

- Puberty is the natural time when a child's body begins to change into an adult body.
- It involves physical and emotional changes driven by hormones.

## When does puberty usually start?

- Females: typically between 8 and 13 years old.
- Males: typically between 9 and 14 years old.

## What physical changes do females typically experience?

- Breast development begins.
- Hair growth under arms and in the pubic area.
- Menstruation (monthly periods) starts.
- Skin may break out (acne).
- Rapid height growth ("growth spurt").

## What physical changes do males typically experience?

- Growth of the penis and testicles.
- Hair growth under arms, in the pubic area, and on the face.
- Muscle development and a deeper voice.
- Acne may appear.
- Rapid height growth ("growth spurt").



# What Pre-Adolescents Understand

As children enter the pre-teen years, they start to grasp more complex ideas about relationships, sexuality, and the physical changes their bodies undergo. At this age, they might also ask questions about topics like crushes, puberty, and why relationships can be complicated, indicating a growing curiosity about the world around them.

Although they're becoming more sophisticated in their thinking, many pre-teens may still not fully understand the concepts of sexual consent and healthy boundaries. **They might struggle with the idea that consent is not just about saying “yes” or “no” but also about feeling comfortable and respected in a relationship.** It's crucial to address these topics in a way that resonates with their experiences.

- For instance, you could explain, “Consent means that both people agree to what happens next, whether that’s holding hands or sharing secrets. If someone seems unsure or uncomfortable, it’s important to check in and ask how they feel.”

Teach Consent created a great video that can be used as a brain teaser.

**Can you spot the 5 ways the kids in this video ask for consent, respond to one another, and accept those responses?**



At this age, children might also start forming deeper connections with friends and experiencing the thrill and confusion of first crushes (which research shows is a very important and memorable time in our adolescent lives!) While these relationships can be exciting, they can also bring up questions about feelings, jealousy, and what it means to respect someone else's boundaries. Encourage open discussions by saying things like, “It’s okay to have crushes and feel nervous! Just remember that true friendships and relationships are based on trust and respect.”

As they navigate these new feelings and understandings, **it’s essential for parents to create an environment where pre-teens feel safe asking questions and expressing themselves.** (Remember how awkward it was navigating life with a rapidly shifting sense of self? Eek!)

Let them know that it’s completely normal to be curious about their bodies and relationships, and that you’re there to help guide them as much as they need. By providing honest and age-appropriate answers, you empower them to make informed decisions about their own lives. At the same time, respecting their autonomy is a great way to build that mutual trust.

# Social Impacts During Pre-Teen Years

Pre-teens are at a developmental period where they become more aware of peer pressure and the social dynamics that influence their choices. They may face situations where they feel pressured to conform to certain behaviors or expectations. During this particularly “new” time, it’s important to discuss how to stand firm in their values and make choices that feel right for them.

**Remind them that it’s perfectly okay to say “no” if something doesn’t feel comfortable, whether it’s trying something new or engaging in behavior they’re unsure about.**



By fostering an understanding of relationships, boundaries, and consent during these formative years, you help your pre-teens develop the skills they need to navigate the complexities of growing up. Encouraging open conversations about their experiences and feelings not only builds their confidence but also reinforces the importance of respect and empathy in all their interactions.



They enjoy spending time together	They don't control what the other one does	They celebrate each other's successes	No one intimidates or threatens the other	They're honest with each other
There is no physical violence	They talk about preventing pregnancy (if pregnancy is possible)	No one pressures the other to do anything	They are proud to be with one another	They're comfortable around each other
They openly communicate their feelings	No one stalks or tracks the other's movements	<b>Free Space</b>	Neither person has financial control over the other	They don't put each other down — to each other or to others
They talk when either person is upset	They don't look through the other's phone without permission	They respect each other's differences	They talk about preventing STDs	They only have sex when they both want to
They're supportive of each other's interests	They get along with each other's friends/family	They're ok with disagreements — they listen to and respect “no”	They each have some of their own friends	They give each other space to do things on their own

**Check out this inspiring Bingo Game from Planned Parenthood that helps parents talk about respectful, loving relationships in a creative way!**

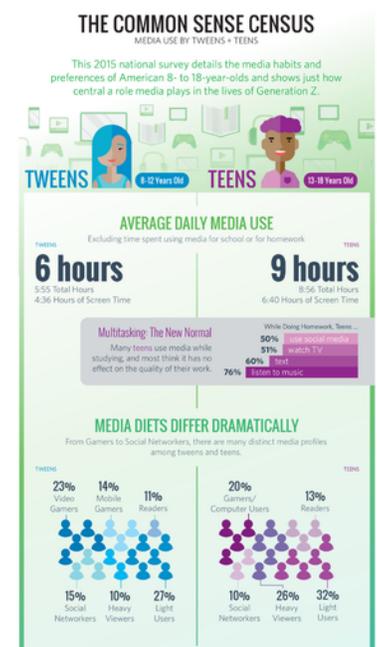


# Where They May Encounter Sexual Content

As pre-adolescents navigate the world, they become increasingly exposed to sexualized content through various media channels, including TV shows, movies, social media, and online platforms.

In today's world, this age group often spends significant time engaging with digital content, where they may come across both overt and subtle representations of relationships and bodies. Popular TV shows and video games often raise questions about relationships, sexuality and bodies. They may even have early encounters with pornography, which can elicit a range of new feelings and reactions.

[Click on the image to the right for data about teen & tween media use from The Common Sense Census!](#)



**It's also important to acknowledge that not all representations of relationships in media are healthy or realistic.** Pre-adolescents may absorb messages about gender roles, consent, and relationships that are skewed or harmful.

- For instance, romantic comedies may portray relationships as effortlessly perfect, leading them to believe that love should always be easy and without conflict. Parents can counter these messages by engaging in discussions about what healthy relationships look like, reinforcing the idea that real-life relationships require effort, communication, and mutual respect.

Conversations among peers also play a significant role in shaping their understanding of sexual and physical topics. Friends may discuss what they've seen in the media or share their own experiences, often in ways that can lead to confusion or misinterpretation.

**When kids hear their friends talking about relationships or physical development, they may feel pressure to conform to social norms or to appear knowledgeable, which can complicate their feelings and understanding of what's appropriate.**

[Psychology Today offers a great resource surrounding tween culture and development.](#)

# How To Prepare Them

**When children know they can approach their parents without judgment, they're more likely to seek guidance and clarity, which has been shown to empower kids to make informed decisions about their own lives! Imagine yourself expressing your innermost feelings to someone who doesn't ask explorative questions or who projects conclusive judgments. It would be difficult to share, right?**

Plus, when discussing consent and boundaries, parents can also address the social pressures pre-adolescents may face, like fitting in with peers or navigating the complexities of early romantic interests. If we want to be involved in the lives of our children, we have to balance the fine line of respecting their choices while offering ourselves as a sounding board where scenarios can be explored and questions can be asked.

**Additionally, it's essential to remind children that it's okay to set their own pace and that they don't have to conform to what others expect.**

Reassuring them that their feelings are valid and that they can take their time in exploring relationships helps build self-confidence and emotional resilience.



Ultimately, by preparing pre-adolescents with knowledge about physical changes, consent, and respectful communication, parents can empower them to navigate this transitional period with confidence and understanding. **Equipping them with these tools fosters a strong foundation for healthy relationships as they move into adolescence and beyond.**

# How To Prepare Them

## Fostering Conversations

As pre-teens begin to navigate media independently, it's essential for parents to engage them in meaningful conversations about the messages they encounter.

- ✔ **By asking open-ended questions like**, “What do you think about how relationships are shown on TV?” parents create an inviting atmosphere that encourages reflection and discussion. This approach allows children to express their thoughts and feelings without feeling judged or pressured, making it easier for them to open up about their own experiences and observations.
- ✔ Parents can also create safe and honest conversation spaces by encouraging pre-teens to share their perspectives. **Showing support and interest in their inner workings fosters critical thinking and helps them develop a deeper understanding of boundaries, respect, and consent.**
  - For instance, if a child comments on a scene where a character crosses someone else's personal space, parents can follow up with questions like, “How do you think that made the other person feel?” or “What would you do in that situation?” Such discussions can illuminate the importance of empathy and consideration for others' feelings.
- ✔ **Parents can also use these conversations as opportunities to clarify misconceptions or address concerns that may arise from media portrayals.**
  - For example, if kids can see both perspectives and potentially justify the actions of a character who crosses boundaries in a TV show, parents can explain the difference between fictional portrayals and real-life relationships. This distinction helps children understand that media often exaggerates or simplifies complex situations, allowing them to approach real-life interactions with a more nuanced perspective.
- ✔ **Moreover, discussing popular culture can serve as a springboard for conversations about societal expectations and stereotypes related to gender and relationships.**
  - Parents might ask questions like, “Do you think the way different people are shown in movies is fair?” or “How do you feel about how friendships are portrayed?” These prompts encourage pre-teens to critically analyze the content they consume, helping them recognize patterns that may perpetuate harmful stereotypes or unrealistic ideals.

# How To Prepare Them

As these conversations unfold, parents should be mindful of their tone and approach, ensuring that discussions remain supportive and non-confrontational. An excellent focus is your relationship with your child, recognizing that it will evolve as time progresses. Navigating discussions from a place of respect can help keep a loving, trusting relationship at the center.

## Here are some helpful communication tips!

### Use “I” Statements



Using “I” statements, such as “I feel concerned when I see characters disrespecting each other,” can help parents express their views while validating their child’s feelings. This collaborative dialogue not only strengthens the parent-child bond but also empowers pre-teens to voice their thoughts and navigate complex social dynamics with confidence.

### Feel free to share from your own experience



It’s also beneficial for parents to share their own experiences and lessons learned regarding relationships, boundaries, and respect. Personal anecdotes can help humanize these discussions, illustrating that everyone encounters challenges and learns over time. When pre-teens see their parents as relatable figures who have faced similar issues, it can encourage them to seek guidance and support as they navigate their own social landscapes.

### Normalize disagreements



Finally, reinforcing that it’s okay to disagree or have different opinions is crucial in fostering a healthy dialogue. Parents should encourage pre-teens to express themselves freely, reminding them that their feelings and viewpoints are valid, even if they differ from others. This practice nurtures open communication and promotes emotional intelligence, which are vital skills as they continue to develop their understanding of relationships, consent, and respect.



# Adolescence

## (ages 13-18)

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### Summary

#### ✔ Comprehensive Sexual Health Education

Provide in-depth knowledge about sexual health, including contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and safe sex practices.

- Example: “Using contraception can help prevent unwanted pregnancies and protect against STIs. It’s important to discuss these options with a healthcare provider.”

#### ✔ Healthy Relationships & Consent

Emphasize the importance of consent in all types of relationships and encourage open communication about boundaries and desires.

- Example: “In a healthy relationship, both partners should feel comfortable expressing their needs and boundaries. Always seek clear and enthusiastic consent before any physical activity.”

#### ✔ Decision-Making & Personal Values

Encourage teens to think critically about their personal values as well as the decisions they make regarding their sexual health and relationships.

- Example: “It’s okay to take your time in relationships and to make decisions that align with your personal values. Trust your instincts and communicate your needs clearly.”

#### ✔ Navigating Peer Pressure

Equip teenagers with strategies to handle peer pressure both related to sex and relationships as well as their everyday lives.

- Example: “If someone is pressuring you to do something you’re not comfortable with, it’s okay to say no and seek support from someone you trust.”



Ah, everyone's most not-confusing and totally clear time of life.  
(Joking. Don't worry.)

Teenagers are developing their own identities, exploring their social autonomy, and forming more complex relationships. In fact, the average age of one's first romantic kiss is 15!

Teenagers are understanding sexuality, relationships, and consent, and their relationship with these topics will deepen as they begin forming romantic relationships.

## Want even more Sex Ed resources?

Check out  
[TriangleSexEd.com](http://TriangleSexEd.com) for  
more resources & advocacy  
efforts local to North  
Carolina!



# What Adolescents Understand

By adolescence, teens begin to develop a more nuanced understanding of sexuality and relationships, moving beyond simplistic ideas they may have held in childhood. Their cognitive abilities are maturing, allowing them to engage in more complex thinking and to grapple with various concepts related to love, attraction, and intimacy.

During these years, teens also become increasingly aware of the diverse spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations. They may explore their own identities, seeking to understand where they fit within this broader context. **This journey can be both exciting and challenging, as they confront societal expectations, stereotypes, and the realities of their personal experiences.**

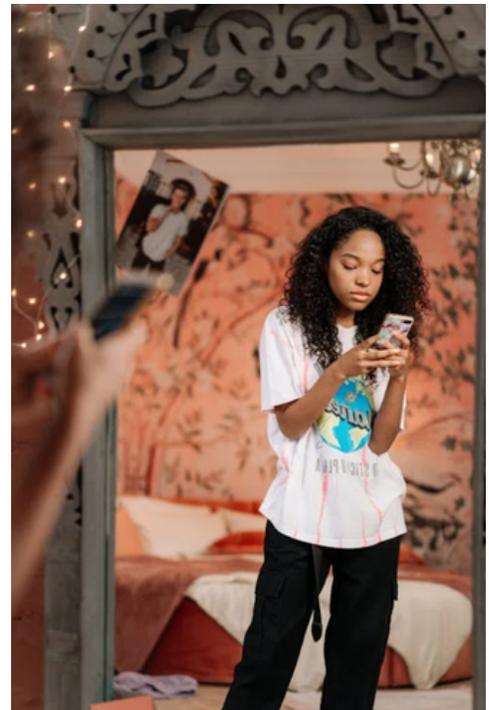
For instance, discussions about gender roles and the fluidity of sexuality can empower teens to embrace their authentic selves and support their peers in doing the same.

In shaping their views on relationships, adolescents are often influenced by their friendships and social circles. Research shows that even just having another peer around can change the reward response in the brain and also the risk-taking tendencies of teenagers.

Conversations about dating, attraction, and even heartbreak become common, providing valuable opportunities for teens to share experiences and seek advice from one another. However, these discussions can also lead to the spread of misinformation or unrealistic expectations about relationships.

**It's crucial for parents and guardians to be present during this time, ready to engage in open conversations about what healthy relationships look like and the importance of mutual respect and understanding!**

**Show Time! Autonomy Comes Center-Stage**



# Teaching Autonomy

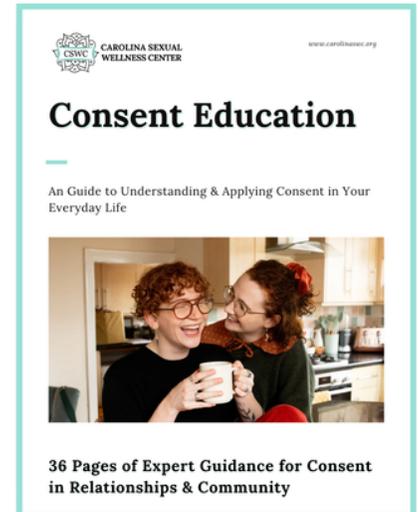
## Consent

As teens formulate their personal values related to sex and relationships, it becomes increasingly important for them to understand the concept of consent.

**Engaging in conversations about consent in a non-judgmental manner helps teens feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and experiences,** and reinforces the idea that consent is not just a “one-time” conversation but an ongoing dialogue.

Need additional support on this topic?

**[Check out our Toolkit on Consent!](#)**



## Boundaries

Moreover, as teens begin to experience romantic relationships, discussions about healthy boundaries, communication, and conflict resolution become essential.

Teens should feel empowered to express their feelings and needs within their relationships, as well as to recognize when those needs are not being met.

**It's also important to recognize that not all teens will have the same experiences or feelings about relationships.** Some may feel pressure to conform to societal norms, while others may feel more comfortable exploring their identities outside traditional frameworks. Encouraging acceptance of diverse experiences fosters an inclusive environment, allowing teens to feel secure in their individuality.

## STIs & STDs

As discussions about sexual health become more relevant, parents should strive to provide accurate and age-appropriate information about safe practices, including contraceptives and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). If you need some extra support here, [Planned Parenthood provides an excellent resource for sexual health conversations!](#)

**Creating an open line of communication about sexual health topics ensures that teens feel comfortable asking questions and seeking guidance, rather than relying solely on potentially unreliable sources.**

# Where They May Encounter Sexual Content

During adolescence, teens are increasingly exposed to sexual content through a variety of channels, including movies, social media, music, and even their personal experiences. (We'll give you a moment to take that in.)

This exposure early in their lives will shape a teen's understanding of relationships and sexuality long term, making it essential for parents and caregivers to be aware of the messages being conveyed. We're not here to shock you or scare you – we're actually here to say these are very normal experiences for today's modern teen, and here's what to keep in mind about the ongoing

## 1. Television & Movies

Movies and television shows often depict relationships in ways that can be both entertaining and misleading. Romantic comedies may portray unrealistic scenarios that gloss over the complexities of consent, communication, and emotional intimacy.

On the other hand, dramas might highlight tumultuous relationships, reinforcing negative stereotypes about love and attraction. It's important for teens to be able to differentiate between fiction and reality, and parents can help by discussing these portrayals in a critical manner. (A study shows that teens actually want less sexual content in their shows and movies.) This fact alone is a great conversation starter.

For instance, after watching a movie together, parents might ask, **“What did you think about the way they handled their relationship?”** or **“How do you think they could have communicated better?”** These conversations can promote deeper thinking about relationships and encourage teens to develop healthier expectations.



# Where They May Encounter Sexual Content

## 2. Social Media

With influencers, celebrities, and peers sharing personal experiences, opinions, and images, the lines between private and public can blur. Content often glamorizes certain lifestyles or behaviors, creating pressure for adolescents to conform to specific ideals regarding relationships, appearance, and sexual activity. Moreover, the pervasive nature of social media can lead to the normalization of unhealthy behaviors, such as body shaming or objectification.

- Parents can ask questions like, “**Have you seen anything online that made you think about relationships?**” or “**What do you think about the way relationships are portrayed on social media?**” This approach helps teens feel more secure in sharing their experiences and fosters a sense of trust.

## 3. Music

Music is another influential medium that often contains sexual themes and messages about relationships. Lyrics can sometimes promote unrealistic expectations or glorify unhealthy dynamics. As teens develop their personal values, they may gravitate toward certain songs or artists that resonate with their feelings about love and sexuality. Engaging in discussions about song lyrics can provide insight into a teen’s mindset and preferences.

- Parents can ask, “**What do you like about this song?**” or “**What do you think the artist is trying to say?**” These conversations not only deepen understanding but also provide opportunities to discuss important topics like respect, consent, and emotional health.



# Where They May Encounter Sexual Content

## 4. Personal Experiences

**Teens may also encounter sexual content through personal experiences, whether it's navigating their own relationships, witnessing friends' interactions, or hearing stories from peers.** These situations can lead to curiosity and questions about what they've seen or heard. Teens often seek information independently, especially if they don't feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics with their parents! This need for information can push them to turn to the internet, where they might encounter a wide range of content—some accurate and helpful, while other sources may be misleading or harmful.

## 5. Pornography

According to a study released by Common Sense Media, about 73% of teenagers (ages 13-17) have watched pornography online, with over half of them first encountering porn prior to age 13. Pornography is very easy for teens to access online, often before they're ready. This exposure may lead to inaccurate or unhealthy ideas about bodies, sex, and relationships, which is why your guidance is critical in helping them develop healthy attitudes about intimacy, consent, and real life.

Given the vast amount of information available online, it's crucial for parents to equip their teens with the skills to discern credible sources. **Discussing how to evaluate information, like considering the reliability of the website, the credentials of the author, or the evidence presented, empowers teens to make informed choices.** Parents can suggest trustworthy resources, such as educational websites, books, or even specific organizations that focus on sexual health and education.

**Open communication, critical thinking, and a strong foundation of trust will empower adolescents to make informed decisions and develop their values in a complex world!** Plus, integrating a sex-positive approach only empowers kids to exercise informed will as they mature.

# How To Prepare Them

- ✓ **Conversations about pornography can feel uncomfortable or overwhelming for many parents. When these moments come up, it can be helpful for parents to manage their own reactions and stay as morally neutral as possible**, so children feel safe asking questions or sharing what they've seen. Rather than responding with fear, silence, or strict rules alone, parents can help by building porn literacy: supporting young people in thinking critically about sexual content, understanding how porn is produced, and recognizing how it differs from real life.

**Porn is a form of acting created for adult entertainment**, and it often presents unrealistic portrayals of bodies, relationships, and sex. Adults may be able to recognize these portrayals as unrealistic, but at their stage of development, kids and teens don't have the basis for understanding what porn is and isn't. Real people come in many shapes and sizes, and healthy sexual relationships are built on communication, mutual respect, and consent (elements that are often missing, oversimplified, or distorted in porn). Parents can also point out that porn rarely addresses important topics like contraception, sexually transmitted infections, emotional connection, or aftercare, all of which are critical parts of real-world sexual health and intimacy.

Here are some additional resources for teaching your teen about porn literacy:

- [Teaching Porn Literacy \(American Psychological Association\)](#)
- [Porn is Not Sex-Ed! \(Book by Jessica Melendez\)](#)

Conversations about porn are also an opportunity to talk explicitly about consent. In real-life relationships, consent is ongoing, mutual, and freely given, and everyone involved should feel comfortable and respected. In porn, however, depictions of consent (including negotiation and sexual autonomy) are often absent, which can give developing minds the impression that consent is not a critical part of sexual interactions. Helping teens understand this distinction can support healthier expectations about sex and relationships as they grow.

**While not all porn use is problematic, parents should be aware of certain patterns that may signal a need for additional support or professional guidance**, like:

- A teen who spends lots of time watching porn that interferes with daily life.
- A very young child who seems distressed or preoccupied by porn content.
- An older person showing porn to a young child, which could be a sign of abuse.

# How To Prepare Them

[Check out this video from the Child Mind Institute!](#)



- ✓ **To effectively prepare teens for the complexities of relationships and sexuality, parents should prioritize fostering open lines of communication,** ensuring that their teens feel comfortable asking questions without fear of judgment. This open dialogue is crucial for creating a safe space where discussions about sex, consent, and healthy relationships can occur naturally and regularly.

Conversations about sexuality should be ongoing rather than a one-time discussion, notes Georgetown Medical Review. As teens encounter new experiences, their questions and concerns will evolve, so it's essential for parents to remain approachable and engaged.

- Parents can initiate these conversations by asking questions like, **“What’s something you’ve heard recently about relationships?”** or **“Are there topics you’d like to talk about more?”** These prompts encourage teens to share their thoughts and feelings, setting the stage for deeper discussions.



# How To Prepare Them

- ✔ **Digital boundaries, especially concerning topics like sexting, are increasingly relevant for teens today.** Parents should address the implications of sharing intimate images or messages and the potential risks involved, such as the permanence of digital content and the importance of consent in online interactions. By discussing these issues openly, parents can help teens navigate the challenges of digital communication with greater awareness. Here's a great [resource on sexting from MissingKids.Org about broaching the sensitive subject](#) with teens.
  - Parents might ask, **“What do you think are the risks of sharing personal photos online?”** This encourages teens to reflect on their actions and understand the importance of privacy and consent in the digital world.
- ✔ **Respecting others' privacy is another crucial topic to cover.** Teens should understand that just as they want their own boundaries respected, they must extend the same courtesy to others.
  - Parents can use examples from media or real life to illustrate this point, asking, **“What do you think is the right way to handle someone else's secrets?”** or **“How would you feel if someone shared something personal about you without your permission?”** Discussions like this promote empathy and reinforce the idea that everyone has the right to control their own narrative.
- ✔ **Moreover, it's essential for parents to validate their teens' feelings and experiences.** If a teen expresses confusion or discomfort about a situation, parents should acknowledge those feelings and encourage open discussion.
  - Phrases like, **“It's completely normal to feel that way”** or **“I'm glad you brought this up”** can reassure teens that their emotions are valid and that it's okay to seek guidance.
- ✔ **Finally, parents can model healthy relationships in their own lives.** (“Do as I say, not as I do” really only gets us so far!) Demonstrating respectful communication, setting boundaries, and showing affection in appropriate ways can provide teens with concrete examples of what healthy interactions look like. When parents and guardians share their own experiences (within appropriate limits), it can help demystify the challenges teens face and provide valuable insights.



# Practical Tips for Parents Across Age Groups

## Use Screen Time to Talk About Sex

Incorporating screen time into discussions about sex and consent is a natural way to engage children at all stages. Whether it's a movie with romantic themes or a show that highlights friendships, parents can use these moments to foster meaningful conversations. Ask questions that encourage reflection, and use examples from the media to discuss the importance of respect, consent, and healthy boundaries in all relationships.

## Create a Safe Environment

Establishing a space where your child feels comfortable asking questions and sharing their thoughts is fundamental. Children should know that no question is too small or embarrassing. Let them know that you are always available to talk about any concerns they may have. This openness encourages curiosity and fosters trust.

## Use Age-Appropriate Language

Tailor your language to align with your child's developmental stage, ensuring they understand the information without feeling overwhelmed. For younger children, utilize simple and clear terms like "body parts." As children grow older, they can handle more specific terminology, allowing for deeper discussions about bodies and relationships.

## Be Open & Honest

Providing truthful information is essential in building trust with your child. Avoid withholding details, as this can lead to confusion and mistrust. For instance, if your child asks how babies are made, give a straightforward answer that is appropriate for their age. This encourages an honest dialogue and empowers them with accurate information.

## Stay Informed

Educating yourself about sexual health and consent is vital to addressing your child's questions confidently. Use reputable resources to stay updated on best practices in sex education, such as the [Planned Parenthood website](#). This knowledge equips you to handle inquiries effectively and provides your child with accurate information.

## **Child Development & Body Awareness**

[Child Mind Institute – Emotional & Physical Boundaries](#)

[Kennedy Krieger Institute – Affection & Personal Space Guidance](#)

[Children’s Health – How to Talk to Kids About Puberty](#)

## **Boundaries, Consent & Bodily Autonomy**

[Teach Consent - Consent for Kids Video](#)

[Child Mind Institute – Teaching Consent & Autonomy](#)

[Carolina Sexual Wellness Center - Consent Toolkit](#)

## **Videos for Kids & Families**

[Child Mind Institute – Personal Space & Boundaries Video](#)

[The Mother Company –Boss of My Body Music Video](#)

[Teach Consent – Spot the Consent Video \(Pre-Teens\)](#)

## **Media Literacy & Internet Safety**

[Movies, TV, & App Reviews - Common Sense Media](#)

[How to Talk to Teens About Sexting - MissingKids.org](#)

[How to Talk to Teens About Porn - Child Mind Institute](#)

[Teaching Porn Literacy - American Psychological Association](#)

## **Sexual Health**

[Sexual Health for Teens - Planned Parenthood](#)

[Pregnancy & Reproduction- Planned Parenthood](#)

## Research Studies

[A Review of Parent-Based Barriers to Parent-Adolescent Communication about Sex and Sexuality: Implications for Sex and Family Educators](#)

[21st Century Parent-Child Sex Communication in the United States: A Process Review](#)

[The importance of early life touch for psychosocial and moral development](#)

[Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education](#)

[Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Attitudes, and Perceptions and Actualities of Sex Education among Elementary School Parents](#)

[Gender Identity in Middle Childhood](#)

[Gender Identity in Middle Childhood](#)

[What it feels like to be a mother: Variations by children's developmental stages](#)

[Fostering open dialogue: Creating safe spaces for adolescents to discuss sexual health](#)

[U.S. teens are less likely than adults to know a trans person, more likely to know someone who's nonbinary](#)

## Books for Kids & Teens

*My Body! What I Say Goes!* – Jayneen Sanders

*Miles Is the Boss of His Body* – Samantha Kurtzman-Counter

*I Said No!* – Kimberly King

*Personal Space Camp* – Julia Cook

*Porn Is Not Sex-Ed!* - Jessica Melendez