

# Parent-Child Communication Best Practices:

Helping Parents Become Knowledgeable and Comfortable as Sexual Health Educators

Open parent\*-child communication around sexual health topics has many positive effects for young people, including helping them protect their own sexual health through more consistent and accurate contraception use and lower sexual risk behaviors. Communication with parents has a protective effect on safer sex behaviors for their young people.<sup>1</sup> It's important that parents engage in conversation with their young people on sexual health topics to equip young people with the information they need to make healthy decisions about their sexual health.

It can be challenging for parents to have discussions with young people about relationships, development, and sex. Many parents themselves are not equipped with the information necessary to have these sexual health conversations and some may worry that talking about sex makes it more likely that their young people will engage in sexual behaviors (though decades of research have found that talking about sexual health topics with young people does not lead to increased sexual behaviors). These challenges can lead to parents avoiding talking to their young people about sex. Research indicates almost one-third of young people ages 12-15 said they had never talked to their parents about sex.<sup>2</sup> For youth-serving professionals, understanding the best practices of parent-child communication can ensure that parents get the support they need to have conversations about sexual health topics with their young person.

## FOR THE YOUNG PERSON INVOLVED, PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION THAT IS FACTUAL, HONEST, AND CARING LEADS TO:

- ✓ Increased health, achievement and self-esteem
- ✓ Improved communication about sex
- ✓ Improved contraceptive and condom use
- ✓ Fewer sexual risk behaviors

## PARENTS SHOULD BE ASKABLE ADULTS

In order to increase communication between parents and young people, it's important for parents to be "askable adults." Youth-serving professionals should encourage parents to:

**Be supportive listeners**

**Practice healthy communication skills**

**Respect each other's boundaries**  
(are they ready to talk about it?)

**Develop trust**

More information can be found at <https://amaze.org/parents/>

*\*"Parent" refers to the adult primary caregiver(s) of an adolescent's basic needs*

## Nonjudgmental, Supportive Communication Between Parents and Young People is Key

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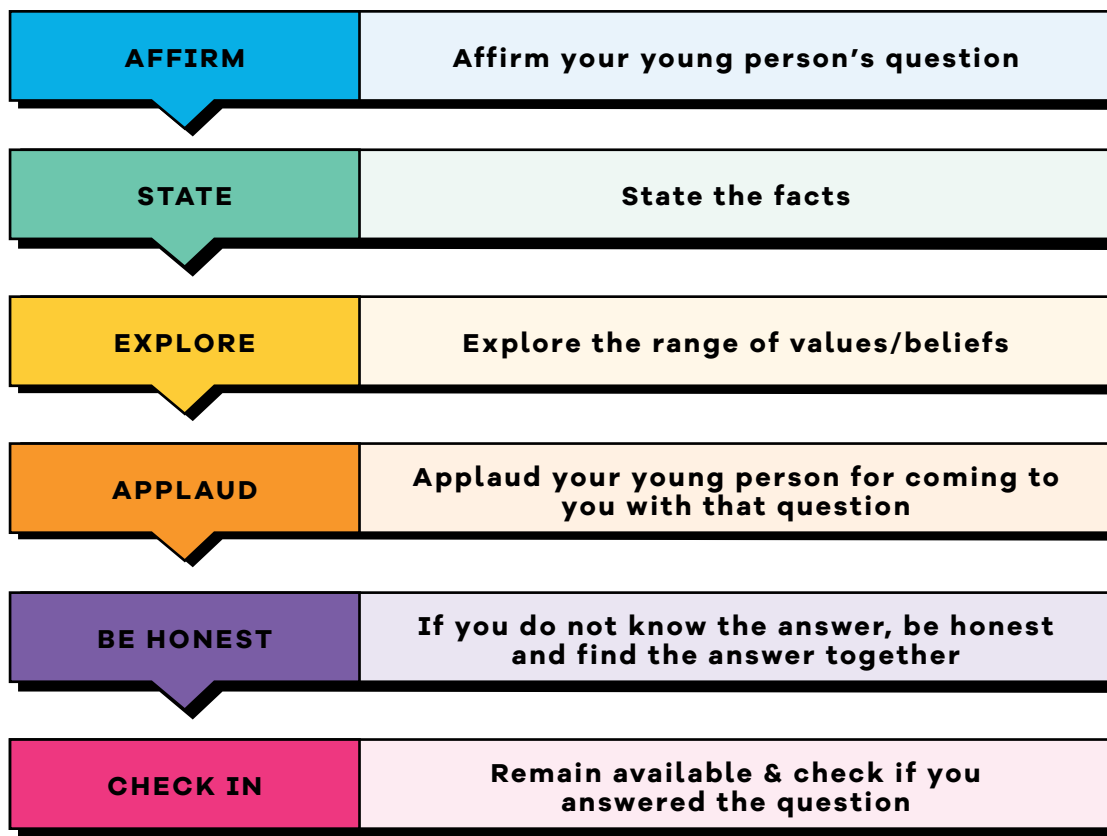
Communication between parents and young people is important in general, but the way that parents and young people communicate also matters. Parent-child communication best practices when talking about sexual health include:

- Responding without negativity or judgment when young people are expressing their opinions about sex.<sup>3</sup> Young people should be able to agree or disagree with their parents without being shamed.
- Increasing comfort with discussing topics like sex, relationships, HIV/STI prevention, and pregnancy. Young people are more likely to approach parents with health or safety issues if they feel comfortable.
- Encouraging young people to ask questions and be prepared to answer or help them find the answer.<sup>4</sup>
- Finding opportunities to have conversations about sexual health in real-time, such as discussing a TV show, movie, or pop culture event.

## Answering Young People's Questions

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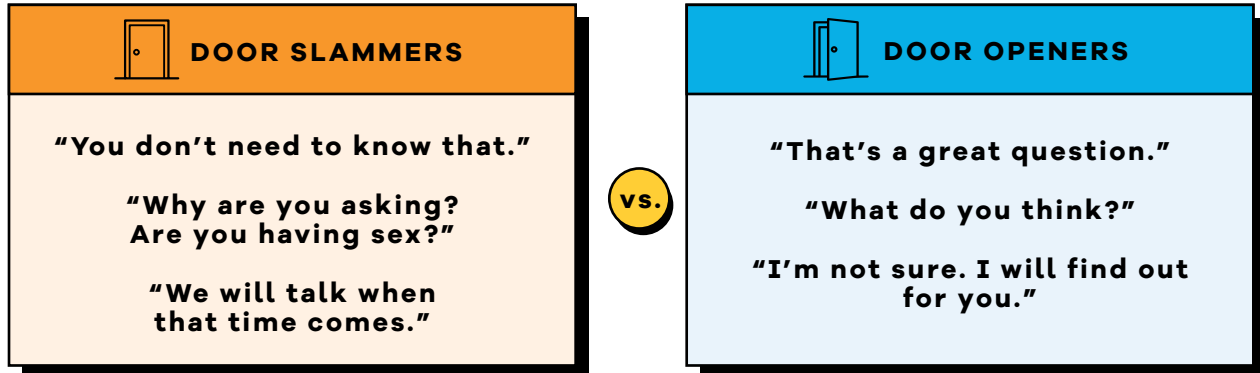
Young people can have a lot of questions about sexual health topics. The following framework can be helpful for parents when formulating answers:



## Door Slammers vs. Door Openers

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A Door Slammer response to a question shuts down the conversation and discourages a young person from asking questions. A Door Opener response is compassionate and validates the question. **Encourage parents to use "Door Openers" when talking to their young people about sexual health.**



## Parent-Child Communication with LGBTQ+ Youth

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Many young people will start to understand more about their sexual orientation and gender identity as they grow older. It's important that parents provide support to their young people, especially if their young person identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer/questioning (LGBTQ+).

Sometimes, parents do not know if their young person is a part of the LGBTQ+ community until they decide to come out to their parents. LGBTQ+ youth face unique challenges due to homophobia and transphobia, making it difficult to live their authentic lives.

- Parental and family support can help LGBTQ+ youth feel valued and reduce the risk of depression, suicide, substance use, and sexually transmitted infections.
- Parents can create an environment of love, acceptance and openness to help their young person feel comfortable with sharing about their identity.
- Parents should be intentional about language when speaking to their youth and avoid assumptions about a young person's sexual behaviors, including how and with whom they engage.
- Parents can educate themselves by doing personal research online, finding out how their school/district focuses on LGBTQ+ health, as well as identifying community organizations that provide LGBTQ+-specific programming.

















**Youth-serving professionals have an important role in educating parents about the importance of parent-child communication about sexual health topics.** Professionals can support parents by highlighting best practices in communication and programs and resources for parents to support their children in their sexual health.

## Programs & Resources

















There are several programs and resources focused on building parents' skills with parent-child communication that can be implemented in a variety of settings. The table below highlights a few examples and the results of the program, which have shown to improve parent-child communication.












PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS: SELECTED EXAMPLES	Program	Content	Program Results
	<b>Keepin' it R.E.A.L.: Mother-Adolescent HIV Prevention Program<sup>5</sup></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adolescents and mothers randomly assigned to three groups.</li> <li>• The control group received one initial HIV education session.</li> <li>• In one intervention group, mothers and adolescents attended sessions separately.</li> <li>• In the other intervention group, mothers and adolescents attended four sessions together and three separately.</li> </ul>	<b>For intervention groups:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increases in condom use and confidence to say no among adolescents.</li> <li>• Increases in mothers' self-efficacy and comfort in talking about sexual health with their children.</li> </ul>
	<b>Parents Matter!<sup>6</sup></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objective: To reduce sexual risk behavior among adolescents by giving parents tools to deliver primary prevention to their 4th and 5th grade children.</li> <li>• Topics included risk awareness, positive parent practices, and sexual communication.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents had a positive rating and said the program was very important.</li> <li>• Parents reported significant increases in the number of sex topics (including abstinence) they discussed with their adolescent.</li> </ul>
	<b>Talking Parents, Healthy Teens<sup>7</sup></b>	<b>Program for parents with session topics on:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building your relationship with your child</li> <li>• Adolescent development and new ways of communicating</li> <li>• Listening skills for talking about sensitive topics</li> <li>• Getting past roadblocks with talking about sex</li> <li>• Helping your child make decisions, assertiveness skills, abstinence, and contraception</li> <li>• Coping with conflict</li> <li>• Supervising your child and how to stay motivated</li> </ul>	<b>For intervention group:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents were significantly less likely to have discussed no new topics and significantly more likely to have discussed seven or more new topics.</li> <li>• Adolescents were significantly more likely to report that their parents had taught them to use a condom.</li> <li>• Adolescents were more comfortable in communicating with their parents.</li> </ul>
	<b>LiFT (Linking Families and Teens)<sup>8</sup></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LiFT focuses on improving and increasing communication between youth and their supportive adults, increasing family connectedness and increasing youth self-efficacy.</li> <li>• Two 2.5 hour modules that parents and youth attend separately</li> <li>• Weekly texts with additional resources</li> </ul>	Studies have found that the majority of the youth who have completed the course choose not to engage in unprotected sex in the year following the course. <sup>9</sup>
	<b>Let's Be Honest Parent Education Program<sup>10</sup></b>	Program designed to help prepare parents to create an environment of trust and comfort in talking with their young people about sexual health. Workshops include such topics as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarifying values and practicing communication skills</li> <li>• Refreshing knowledge of reproductive anatomy, physiology, and puberty</li> <li>• Promoting healthy relationships and self-esteem</li> <li>• Understanding sexually transmitted diseases</li> <li>• Managing peer pressure and media influences</li> </ul>	N/A

PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION SELECTED RESOURCES

Link	Type	Description	Provider
<a href="#"><u>Right Time to Communicate</u></a>	 INTERACTIVE TOOL	A timeline of age specific key messages and suggested activities for young people to support them while they develop and grow.	
<a href="#"><u>Sex and Sexuality Topics By Age</u></a>	 WEBSITE	Explore different sex and sexuality topics by age. Provides more detailed information on how parents can respond to their young person's questions.	
<a href="#"><u>Talking with Your Teens about Sex: Going Beyond "the Talk"</u></a>	 PDF	Offers practical actions for parents to help strengthen their efforts to engage positively with their young person and to have meaningful discussions with them about sex.	
<a href="#"><u>Kids-Ask</u></a>	 INTERACTIVE TOOL	Focused on young people aged 3-12 years old, this interactive tool helps parents craft answers for their young person's questions around reproductive and sexual health.	
<a href="#"><u>Talking to Your Child About Sex</u></a>	 WEBSITE	The do's and don'ts for talking to young people about sex.	
<a href="#"><u>Be an Askable Parent</u></a>	 WEBSITE	How to be an askable parent and educate a young person about sexual health.	
<a href="#"><u>Uplifting Youth Through Healthy Communication About Race</u></a>	 WEBSITE	Resources for parents to assist them in promoting strength, health and well-being among youth of color.	
<a href="#"><u>Talking to Your Kids About Consent Conversation Tips for Parents</u></a>	 PDF	A parent discussion guide that directs parents in speaking to their young person with respect about difficult conversations such as consent and sexual assault.	

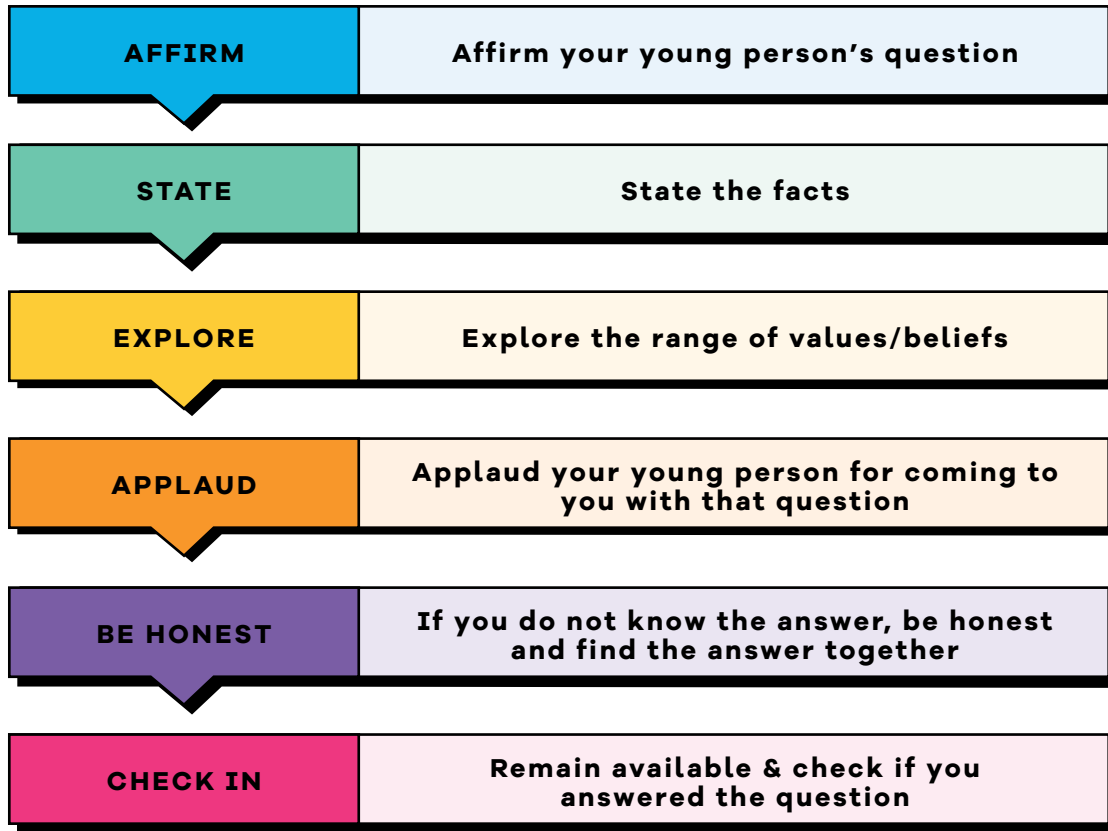
PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION SELECTED RESOURCES

Link	Type	Description	Provider
<a href="#"><u>Talking to Your Children about Relationships</u></a>	 WEBSITE	Advice for parents on talking to their young people about healthy relationships and unhealthy relationships. This includes topics such as values, bullying, and peer pressure.	
<a href="#"><u>Talking About Consent and Healthy Relationships at Every Age</u></a>	 PDF	One-page guide for discussing consent at every age.	
<a href="#"><u>Coming Out: Information for Parents of LGBTQ Teens</u></a>	 WEBSITE	Information for parents and families on how to support their LGBTQ+ youth.	
<a href="#"><u>Are You an Askable Parent?</u></a>	 PDF	Two-page guide that provides clear steps for parents to consider that will make them an approachable parent to their young person who identifies as LGBTQ+.	
<a href="#"><u>Gender-Diverse &amp; Transgender Children</u></a>	 WEBSITE	Provides definitions to guide understanding of questioning identities; goes over mental health support and when to contact the pediatrician.	
<a href="#"><u>Tips for Parents of LGBTQ Youth</u></a>	 WEBSITE	Provides tips for parents of LGBTQ+ youth on how to start and encourage dialogue with their young person and how to access community resources.	
<a href="#"><u>Creating Safer Spaces for LGBTQ Youth</u></a>	 PDF	This toolkit has been developed to assist individuals, community-based organizations, providers, healthcare staff, educators, and others that see the value of incorporating key safer space components into their organizations so that young people survive and thrive.	
<a href="#"><u>Talk More Parent Planner</u></a>	 WEBSITE	Parent Planners per age group that include which topics to cover, at approximately what age, suggestions for starting the conversation and teaching resources.	

PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION SELECTED RESOURCES	Link	Type	Description	Provider
	<a href="#"><u>Planned Parenthood Let's Talk Month</u></a>	 WEBSITE	Let's Talk Month campaign happens annually in October and encourages young people and parents to communicate with one another about sexuality – including relationships, bodies and body image, reproduction, gender and sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and preventing pregnancy and STIs.	
	<a href="#"><u>Amaze.org</u></a>	 WEBSITE	Informational animated videos to help parents and their young people better understand the different topics of sexual health.	
	<a href="#"><u>Amaze Family: Supporting Trans Youth</u></a>	 WEBSITE	Pediatricians talk about how to best support trans youth.	 
	<a href="#"><u>Sex Positive Families</u></a>	 WEBSITE	Provides education aimed at parents and families to foster sexually healthy young people. Workshops, courses, and resources.	
	<a href="#"><u>GCAPP Parent Toolkit: A Parent-Child Communication Guide</u></a>	 PDF	This toolkit supports parents in having conversations across a breadth of health topics.	

# Parent-Child Communication Tools and Handouts

## Answering Young People's Questions



## Door Slammers vs. Door Openers

 **DOOR SLAMMERS**


**AVOID SAYING:**

"You don't need to know that."

"Why are you asking?  
Are you having sex?"

"We will talk when  
that time comes."

vs.

 **DOOR OPENERS**

**INSTEAD SAY:**

"That's a great question."

"What do you think?"

"I'm not sure.  
I will find out for you."



## Resources:

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8. Brown, S.A., Turner, R.E., & Christensen, C. (2021). Linking Families and Teens: Randomized Controlled Trial Study of a Family Communication and Sexual Health Education Program for Rural Youth and Their Parents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 69 (3), 398-405. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.05.020>
9. <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/planned-parenthood-great-northwest-hawaii-alaska-indiana-kentuck/blog/lift-award-winning-sex-ed-program-is-nationally-recognized>
10. <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/planned-parenthood-massachusetts/local-training-education/parents/lets-be-honest-workshops>

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