

# Tips for Talking with Sexually Active Teens about Contraception

According to the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, each year in the United States nearly 850,000 teens experience pregnancy, mostly unintentionally.<sup>1</sup> U.S. teens also experience about three million sexually transmitted infections (STIs) each year.<sup>2</sup> A critical issue in reducing these numbers is encouraging teens to use contraception consistently and correctly.

Parents can play an important role in helping young people to utilize their own values, aspirations, and expectations in deciding the appropriate time in life for initiating sexual intercourse. Parents can also provide teens with important information about contraception and encourage them to use contraception correctly and consistently. The following tips can help parents to talk with young people about contraception and to support youth in using contraceptives effectively and consistently.

- Educate yourself about the specifics of contraception and STIs. Learn about contraception, including emergency contraception, and about condoms. Learn how contraceptives work, the cost of various methods, side effects, pros and cons of each method, and where teens can go for information and services. Learn also about STIs—gonorrhea, syphilis, herpes, genital warts, and HIV—including ways they are transmitted, symptoms, risks, and treatment options.
- Carefully explain your own feelings and values about sexual intercourse and contraceptive use. Include personal memories and values. Values that are related to contraceptive and condom use include respect for self and partner, responsibility, and trust. Other values pertinent to discussing contraception may include, but are not limited to, those related to life, children, and future aspirations.
- Listen carefully. Only by listening to your teen's feelings and values will you understand how he/she approaches decisions, including sexual decisions. When you understand your teen's values, you can ask questions that help the teen clarify how to act consistently with those values. For example, a teen might say, "I believe that too many children need homes and there are too many people in the world." This is an opportunity to ask what actions related to preventing pregnancy would be consistent with that value.
- Avoid assumptions.
  - Do not assume that your teen knows everything he/she needs to know about contraception and condoms. Assure your teen that knowledge is power and that you want him/her to have the power that comes from knowledge. Assure your teen that you will not make assumptions based on the teen's questions or concerns.
  - Do not make assumptions about the teen's sexual orientation or about his/her sexual behavior based on that orientation.
  - Do not assume that there is only one kind of sexual intercourse. Many teens are having oral and/or anal intercourse, believing that this is not "sex." Be clear with your teen that all these types of intercourse are sexual intercourse and are behaviors that necessitate protection.
- Arm your teen with information. Talk with your teen about what you have learned about contraception, including condoms and emergency contraception (EC). Encourage your teen to seek out further information and to decide what method would be right for him/her. Say that being prepared in advance is always the intelligent, mature choice. Make sure your teen knows where he/she can go for confidential sexual health services, including contraception and STI testing and treatment.

- Be sure that your teen has information about contraception and condoms regardless of his/her sexual orientation. Gay and lesbian teens sometimes have sexual intercourse with members of the opposite gender in order to hide their sexual orientation. Any young person may experiment. Regardless of sexual orientation, all youth need to know how to prevent pregnancy as well as STIs.
- Discuss using condoms as well birth control. Teens need to know that contraceptive methods, such as birth control pills, Depo-Provera, and the IUD, don't protect against STIs. Teens need to know that they can contract STIs, including HIV, from unprotected vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse. For best protection, a teen and his/her partner need to use both condoms and another form of birth control. Consider making condoms available in your home.
- Make sure your teens knows know about emergency contraception—which can be taken to prevent pregnancy up to 120 hours (five days) after unprotected intercourse or when a contraceptive method fails.
- Encourage your teen to take equal responsibility with a partner for using condoms and birth control. Just as a male should not be the only one responsible for providing condoms, so a female should not be the only one responsible for providing for other forms of contraception. Protection is a mutual responsibility within a caring relationship.
- Discuss being “swept away.” Many teens say they did not use condoms or contraception because they “just got swept away.” Be clear that this is not okay. Anyone who is mature enough to have sexual intercourse is mature enough to use protection.
- Discuss sexual coercion and dating violence with your teen. Make sure that your teen knows she/he has the right to say no and the right to be safe. Make sure your teen knows that he/she can come to you or another trusted adult if a relationship involves or threatens to involve coercion or violence. Make sure your teen knows that it is both illegal and contrary to your family's values to use coercion or violence against anyone else. Help teens identify ways to avoid/get away from sexual situations that feel uncomfortable or dangerous.
- Identify with your teen the names of other adults to whom he/she can go if unable or unwilling to come to you. This could be a relative, clergy member, health care provider, or friend, but identify the person as someone your teen can trust for confidential guidance and support. Give your teen permission to confide in someone else and say that these conversations will remain confidential although the other adult may encourage the teen to involve you.
- Consider incorporating the Rights. Respect. Responsibility.<sup>®</sup> philosophy into your value system, especially in relation to talking about sexual health and contraception with your teen.
  - RESPECT your young person's RIGHT to confidential sexual and reproductive health services. Share with your teen what to expect at his/her first visit for sexual health services. Then, ensure that your teen has private sessions with the health care provider. Private sessions empower teens to discuss issues honestly with the provider and to go for care when they need it.
  - Encourage your teen to take RESPONSIBILITY for her/his personal sexual and reproductive health needs. Provide support so teens can make and keep appointments for annual medical exams and other needed health care.

#### References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Teen Pregnancy. [Fact Sheet]. Atlanta, GA: The Centers, 1999.
2. Alan Guttmacher Institute. Facts in Brief: Teen Sex and Pregnancy. New York, NY: The Institute, 1998.