

## [Are Parents and Teens Talking about Sex?](#)



In April 2002, Seventeen Magazine and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation conducted a nationally representative survey of 15- to 17-year-old youth in the United States about sexual health communication between teens and their parents.<sup>[1]</sup> The survey provides a snapshot of teens' views on the subject.

- Fifty-one percent of teens (61 percent of females; 42 percent of males) had discussed with their parents "how to know when you are ready to have sex."
- Forty-three percent of teens (53 percent of females; 33 percent of males) had discussed with their parents how to talk to a boyfriend or girlfriend about sexual health issues, such as pregnancy, birth control, and STIs.
- Among male teens, 50 percent had discussed condoms, but only 35 percent had discussed other forms of contraception. Among female teens, 54 percent had discussed condoms and 63 percent had discussed other forms of contraception with parents. Overall, 52 percent of teens had discussed condoms with their parents; 49 percent had discussed other forms of contraception.
- Fifty-six percent of teens (64 percent of females; 48 percent of males) had discussed HIV/AIDS with their parents. Fifty percent of teens (56 percent of females; 44 percent of males) had discussed STIs with parents.

Teens indicate various reasons why they may not talk to parents about sexual health issues.

- Eight-three percent of teens worried about their parents' reaction.
- Eighty percent of teens worried that parents will think they have had sex or are going to have sex.
- Seventy-eight percent named embarrassment as a big reason.
- Seventy-seven percent of teens (83 percent of females; 71 percent of males) said they didn't know how to bring the subject up.

Survey results dovetail with the findings of peer-reviewed research into parent-child communication. The survey hints at two important issues that other research also addresses: parents discussing condoms with their teens before young people initiate sexual intercourse and differences in parent-child communication that shortchange young men.

## Parents Discussing Condoms with Teens

A study of 14- to 17-year-old adolescents and their mothers underscores the importance of the timing of parent-child discussions about using condoms. Results showed that talking about condoms before first sexual intercourse significantly increases the likelihood of a young person's using condoms. The study found that maternal discussions about condoms in the year prior to first sexual intercourse are strongly associated with teens' using condoms while such discussions after teens initiated sexual intercourse are not.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Gender Differences in Parent-Child Communication

Many studies found that mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to discuss sexuality with their children. In one study, just over 54 percent of students reported discussing HIV with a parent. Percentages varied little by race/ethnicity but varied significantly by gender—60 percent of female teens had discussed HIV with a parent compared to 49 percent of male teens.<sup>[3]</sup> Another study found that mother-daughter discussions are more likely to include information on sexual health issues than are mother-son discussions.<sup>[4]</sup> Father-daughter discussions about sexuality, while relatively infrequent, still outnumber father-son discussions regarding sexuality.<sup>[4]</sup> The result—young boys and young men receive relatively little guidance and support from their parents in developing the skills they need to make healthy decisions about sex. Young men may also be receiving relatively little support in developing the values that will help them to build loving, responsible, committed, intimate relationships in adulthood.

Parents need to understand the critical importance of discussing sexuality with young people. Discussing condoms prior to first sexual intercourse doesn't "give kids permission" to have sex; it gives them permission to behave responsibly. And, leaving

sons out of the conversation doesn't promote their maturity; it handicaps them.

**References:**

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