

Talking sex with young people



Young people learn about sex, sexuality and relationships from many different sources. They need accurate, balanced information that helps them make healthy choices and keep themselves and others safe.

Parents give messages about sexual matters through their attitudes, values and behaviour, whether they talk about it or not. Talking with your young person can strengthen your relationship and help them work out their values. They learn they can talk with you about sensitive matters.

Why talk about sex?

Talking with your young person about sex, sexuality and relationships is important because:

- you have a big influence on their values and how they relate to others. These are key matters young people are working out at this time in their lives
- it is a chance to give accurate, balanced information
- young people see lots of images and information in the media and online which can give distorted ideas about sex and relationships. You can help them question what they see and hear
- young people who have comprehensive sex education make healthier choices. They delay having sex and have fewer unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections
- research shows that by age 16-17 around 2 in 3 teenagers have had a romantic relationship and 1 in 3 have had sexual intercourse. Of those who have had sexual intercourse, 1 in 5 had done nothing to prevent sexually transmitted infections, and 1 in 12 had done nothing to prevent pregnancy.

Young people living with disability or learning difficulties may need extra help to learn about sexual matters, feelings, friendships, relationships and keeping safe. There are services that can help if needed.

Sometimes cultural or religious beliefs can affect how parents approach talking about sex. Whatever your beliefs your young person, regardless of their gender, needs accurate information that keeps them safe and helps them feel good about who they are.

Talking with your young person about sex can build trust. They will be more likely to come to you if something worries them. It is never too late to start having these conversations.

Tips for talking with young people

- Be aware of your feelings about sex and relationships. Your emotions can affect how you talk about these things.
- Think about how your attitudes and values have affected you and others in your life. What values and messages do you want to pass on?
- Consider whether what you say aligns with what you do. Young people are quick to see double standards.
- If you have a partner, talk about how you'll approach these matters. You may have different views.
- Many single parents or those in same-gender relationships choose to link their child with trusted adults of different genders they can also talk to.
- Learn about the sexual issues young people face today, eg through TV, social media, websites, books, magazines, other parents, health services or your school.

- Consider how you will approach topics such as puberty, masturbation, sexual attraction, relationships, sexuality, consent, contraception, abortion.
- Talk about sex and feelings in an inclusive way and show you respect diversity. You are helping your child build empathy and respect for differences in others. Young people who are attracted to their own gender or multiple genders or questioning their gender identity often feel different, confused and alone. They learn they can come to you whatever their feelings.

Let your young person know you are happy to talk about these matters any time. If they don't want to talk to you, make sure they have good information and another trusted person to talk to.

Be approachable and unshockable

- Try to be calm and relaxed and talk easily and openly. The more you do this, the easier it will become.
- Take opportunities as they arise to have small conversations about these topics. You could talk about what you see and hear in the media, what others say or issues at school. It's a chance to learn more about how your young person sees things.
- It can be easier to talk when you are doing things such as travelling in the car, going for a walk or washing the dishes.
- Be prepared to listen and show respect for your young person's views – even if you don't agree.
- Have two-way conversations rather than do all the talking or give a lecture.
- Ask for their opinions and invite them to come up with solutions to problems. You are helping them build coping skills.
- Model the respectful tone and language you expect from them.

Find good information

- Help your young person find accurate, balanced information from reliable sources.
- Answer their questions honestly. If you don't have the answer, say you'll find out or help them find what they need.
- If they have a health appointment, you could offer to go with them. Respect their choice to go by themselves, take a friend or for you to stay in the waiting room.

Encourage self-worth

It is important young people feel good about themselves. Encourage them to:

- feel good about their body and know how it works
- be comfortable with their values and who they are
- have a positive attitude towards their sexuality
- show respect for themselves and others
- make healthy, safe choices.

Focus on healthy relationships

Talk about healthy relationships before your son or daughter starts dating. Help them understand that:

- healthy relationships involve mutual care, respect, safety and feeling worthwhile
- they don't have to stay in unhealthy relationships, eg those involving controlling behaviours, threats, put downs, jealousy, or that result in feelings of worthlessness. Help them see the signs and work out what to do
- they have the right to say 'No' or 'Stop' to any unwanted sexual activity, eg kissing, touching, intercourse.

It is important to talk about relationships and feelings as well as the physical aspects of sex. Stress the importance of mutual respect, consent and safety.



Teach sexual responsibility

Encourage your young person to be sensitive, responsible and safe about sex. Make sure they know:

- that sexual responsibility and respect for sexual partners is equally important for all genders. Be careful not to encourage different expectations
- how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections and avoid pregnancy
- where to get and how to use products that reduce risk, eg condoms, dams, contraception and emergency contraception
- about the risks of using alcohol and other drugs. These can increase the likelihood of acting before thinking, having unsafe sex or of others taking advantage of them
- the choices they have if there is a pregnancy
- about regular health checks - Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) immunisation, testicular cancer checks, pap smears for anyone with a cervix who has been sexually active, and checks for sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Teach about consent

Consent is required for all sexual activities including sexual touching, images and messaging. Make sure your young person understands that sexual consent means:

- freely and clearly agreeing to any kind of sexual activity
- being able to change your mind at any time
- being free to say 'No' even if you have agreed in the past
- always making sure the person you want to be sexual with is comfortable and wants to go further.

It is NOT consent if someone is:

- incapable of understanding what they are agreeing to
- uncertain or unclear about being sexual

- asleep, unconscious or so influenced by alcohol or drugs they don't know what's going on
- pressured, manipulated or forced to have sex. This is a crime.

With regard to nude/partial nude images, it is illegal to ask for/take/store/send sexual images of anyone under 18 - they are not legally able to consent to this. Over the age of 18 taking/sharing/threatening to share these images without consent can be a crime.

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In South Australia the age of consent for sexual intercourse is 17 years for both males and females.
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Work tricky things out together

When young people know they can talk openly with you, it's easier to work out the tricky things.

- Talk about what's OK in your home. If your young person's partner stays overnight is it OK for them to sleep together? Some parents feel fine about this, others don't. What do the parents of the other young person think?
- If you feel OK about having them sleep over, talk with your family ahead of time about what would work for everyone. Do this when family members are open to discussion and there's time to talk it through.
- Remember what the law says about the age of consent.

Talk about pornography

Pornography has become a big issue for all young people. It is easy to find online either accidentally or by searching. It can influence young people's attitudes to sex and shape their behaviours and expectations, and those of their peers. It can affect their ability to form healthy, respectful relationships.

- You might use a TV program, news report or website to open up a conversation. This might feel uncomfortable but is just part of talking about sexuality and respectful relationships.
- You could ask questions that make it seem less personal but which help you understand what they already know and think about pornography, eg 'Do any kids at school talk about pornography?', or 'Do you have any questions about what you've heard?'



- Let them know it is OK to be curious about sex and sexuality but important to understand pornography does not encourage respect.
- Rather than say it is 'good' or 'bad', use it as an opportunity to talk about the messages it sends and how these fit with their values. For example, pornography may focus on extreme sexual behaviour rather than on feelings and relationships. It can make people think that:
 - respectful relationships and mutual consent aren't important
 - practising safe sex isn't necessary
 - rough sex and domination are the norm, and aggression and violence are to be expected.

Don't let pornography be a source of sexuality and relationships education. Your young person may think this is what to expect.

Sexual orientation and gender diversity

Social awareness about the diversity of sexual attraction and people's sense of gender identity is growing rapidly. Talking about these things with young people supports their development and promotes respect and empathy for others.

Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional, physical and sexual attraction to others. Young people can be attracted to:

- people of a different gender
- people of their own gender
- people of multiple genders, not always equally.

Some young people may experience no sexual attraction. This is called being asexual.

Gender diversity

Gender identity refers to a deep inner sense of who we are as male, female, both or neither.

- Some young people identify as a gender different from the one typical of their biological sex. They can feel more like a girl even if thought to be a boy at birth or the other way round. Some identify with being both male and female and others as not fitting neatly into either category.
- Gender diverse people often say they knew their gender was different to their biological sex from a young age.
- Gender diverse people can face rejection, harassment, discrimination and social isolation. A supportive network of family, friends, professionals can make a big difference to the impact this has on young people's mental health and wellbeing.

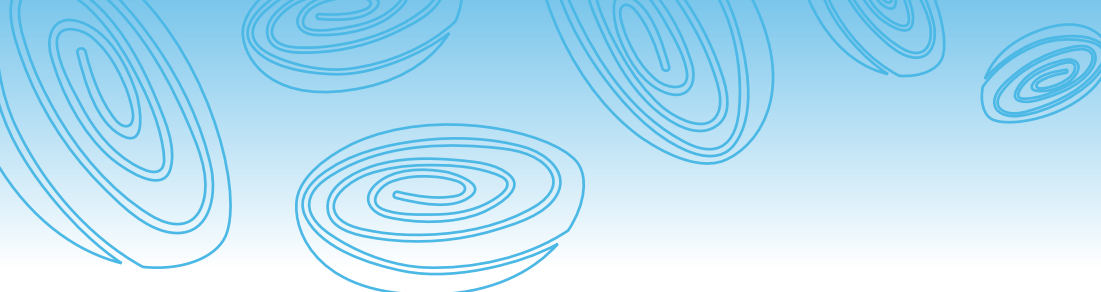
Gender identity does not determine who we are attracted to. Just like all young people, gender diverse young people could have any sexual orientation. They may still be working out who they are attracted to.

If your young person is questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity

You can help by:

- making sure they know you love them and are proud of them
- listening and asking how you can help
- respecting their wishes regarding privacy and confidentiality
- using personal names, sexuality and gender descriptions and pronouns of their choice, eg lesbian/gay/bisexual/pansexual/asexual, girl/boy, she/he/they
- not saying too much about any concerns you may have
- being their advocate when you need to, eg at school or other services





- finding good information and connecting with health professionals experienced in these matters, especially if your young person seems upset, confused or distressed
- seeking positive support for them and for yourself.

If you find these topics hard to talk about, or your young person doesn't want to talk to you, reassure them they are not alone. They may wish to connect with a support group. You may also find it helpful to connect with other parents in the same situation.

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Two-way conversations about sexual matters, including sexual orientation and gender identity, support young people's health, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

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Note: The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.

Want more information?

SHINE SA

SHINE welcomes and celebrates all people from diverse cultures, sexual orientations, genders, sexes and abilities. Fact sheets are free to download and may support discussion around puberty, menstruation and other sexual health topics <https://shinesa.org.au>

SHINE SA - Sexual Healthline

Phone 1300 883 793 or 1800 188 171 (country callers)
9am–12:30pm, Mon to Fri

Confidential service providing advice on a range of sexual health matters

Healthy WA, Department of Health

'Talk soon. Talk often. A guide for parents talking to their kids about sex' (2019). Detailed, easy to read information on talking to all young people about sex, sexuality and gender www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/S_T/Talk-soon-Talk-often

ReachOut

Health and wellbeing information for parents and young people, including about sex, gender, sexuality and relationships <https://au.reachout.com/>

Raising Children Network

Parenting information, including talking with young people about sex, sexuality, gender and relationships <https://raisingchildren.net.au/>

Islamicare Parenting and Youth Helpline

Phone 1800 960 009, 8am-6pm, 7 days a week
Confidential support for parents of teenagers and young people <http://Islamicare.org.au>

Headspace

Phone 1800 650 890
Talk face to face, by phone or chat online www.eHeadSpace.org.au
Support and counselling for young people aged 12-25 and their families
Find your local centre at www.headspace.org.au

Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 551 800 any time day or night
Phone and online support for children and young people 5-25 years and their families <https://kidshelpline.com.au>

1800 RESPECT

Phone 1800 737 732 any time day or night
Talk to someone by phone or online about sexual assault or family violence www.1800respect.org.au

Youth Law Australia

Free, confidential legal information for young people including on sex and dating <https://yla.org.au/>

Women's and Children's Hospital Gender Diversity Service

Referrals accepted for anyone up to age 17 for gender identity concerns www.wch.sa.gov.au/patients-visitors/patient-support-services/genderdiversity

Uniting Communities Bfriend

Phone (08) 8202 5190 or email bfriend@unitingcommunities.org
Talk to someone about sexuality, gender identity or intersex status www.unitingcommunities.org/service/community-support/lgbtiqa-support

Beyond Blue

'Families like mine' guide for families of young gay, lesbian, bisexual, gender diverse people www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-lgbti-people/families-like-mine

Transcend

Information, peer support and links to other services for families of transgender children <https://transcendaus.org/>

Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including 'Young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual', 'Living with young people' and 'Young people, feelings and depression' www.parenting.sa.gov.au





**Government
of South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services
and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Phone: 08 8303 1660

Web: www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended
to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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