**SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AND DATING**

*Sexual maturation at puberty can begin as early as age 8 or 9 years for some girl, but may not occur until as late as 16 years for some boys. Peer pressure, exposure to the media, and social events can also influence when teenagers show interest in the opposite sex. Although children may learn some basic facts at school, it is important for parents to take responsibility for educating their teenagers about sex. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you guide your teenager through puberty and manage the sexual behaviour that accompanies this transition.*

**HOW COMMON IS TEENAGE SEXUAL ACTIVITY?**

Adolescent sexual activity is increasing. Around one in ten children aged 13 or younger say they have had sexual intercourse, with this figure rising to a quarter of 15 year olds, and a half of 17 year olds. Both boys and girls now appear equally likely to report sexual activity. This increased sexual activity has led to increases in Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) among teenagers.

**WHAT IS NORMAL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR?**

Different cultures, religions and ethnic groups have differing views about what sexual activity is acceptable, and when. Some of these views are written as law, whereas others are social conventions. At a biological level, girls typically begin to develop breasts and menstruate around the age of 12 years, although this can occur much earlier. Boys may start to develop body hair, have unwanted erections, or wet dreams during their sleep about the same time.

**WHY EARLY SEXUAL ACTIVITY CAN BE A PROBLEM?**

By the time they reach Academy, children often have a general understanding of dating and sex, but there are usually many gaps in their knowledge of issues such as STDs or contraception. Some sources that teenagers use are quite reliable and can be useful while others are inaccurate and can be very misleading. Information from friends is often unreliable, as many teenagers want to appear experienced or accomplished which can lead to false claims or exaggeration.

Books, magazines, TV, films and websites often have strong sexual and romantic themes. Teenagers can therefore be overwhelmed with sexual images, often presented as inappropriate, violent or unrealistic.

Teenagers often begin sexual activity early when they have friends who are sexually active. More rebellious teenagers, and those with strained relationships with parents (and who are not religious) are more likely to be involved in early sexual activity. Group social situations are generally less likely to lead to sexual experiences than one-on-one dating. Younger teens are also often more comfortable in small groups than being alone with one other person for several hours. However, late night parties in homes without adult supervision or where alcohol is available increase the changes of sexual activity.

Interest in sex is natural although it can cause anxiety, embarrassment, guilt and even shame if handled poorly.Teenagers may begin to masturbate and become embarrassed or angry if parents disturb them in the bathroom or their bedroom. There are no known health or mental health risks related to masturbating, unless a teenager is so preoccupied that it prevents them from participating in normal activities.

Many teenagers, especially boys, become interested in pornography through books, magazines, videos or the internet. Some teenagers go through a stage of being fascinated by pornography. Looking at pornography does not necessarily encourage other sexual activity.

**HOW TO PREVENT TEENAGERS DEVELOPING SEXUAL PROBLEMS**

* **Look for opportunities to talk with your teenager about sex**

As teenagers interest in sex begins to change from curiosity to activity, it is important to find times to talk to them.

Be prepared for the normal physical changes that take place at this time. Reassure your teenager that this is part of their normal physical development. Explain that it is a sign they are beginning to change from a child to a young adult.

Prepare your teenager for these changes by taking advantage of any questions or comments made by them.

Answer any questions and allow your child to end the discussion when they are ready.

* **Limit discussion to one or two issues**

There may be many issues you think need to be discussed such as dating, differences in sex-drives for boys and girls, contraception, pregnancy, disease, and sex before marriage.

It is best to limit discussions to one or two of these at any one time. Otherwise, your teenager may feel overwhelmed. Avoid long discussions, or lecturing your teenager.

* **Be prepared to talk about your own sexual experiences**

Teenagers are often unsure about where to obtain accurate information about sexual behaviour and dating.

Most teenagers need to be able to ask about their parents’ experience and wisdom on sexual matters. It is the parent/s’ job to make this available in a non-threatening, non-judgemental way. Although some teenagers find it difficult to believe that their parents may still be sexually active, they are usually curious about what you did when you were their age, and what your early sexual experiences were like. It can come as a shock to parents if they are suddenly asked *When did you (two) start having sex?* It is not necessary to tell all, but if you can, be honest and give as much detail as you feel comfortable in sharing.

* **Get more information to answer your teenager’s questions**

Sometimes a question will come up that you had not thought of, or just do not know the answer to. Do not pretend, or make up something that ‘sounds about right’. It is okay for parents not to have every fact at their fingertips.

* **Monitor your teenager’s reading and viewing**

Many parents are rightly concerned about the effects on teenagers’ attitudes to sex when they view a lot of violent or unusual sexual acts. Each parent needs to decide for themselves whether they believe such material is acceptable in their home.

**WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR TEENAGER STARTS DATING**

Teenagers may become actively engaged in sexual activity before they start dating. However, once they begin dating, increased sexual activity is more likely.

* **Show interest in your teenager’s relationships**

Teenage relationships are often difficult, especially if a teenager’s self-confidence is low. It is easy for teenagers to become negative about themselves or their ability to establish or maintain relationships with members of the opposite sex. They may discuss problems they are having with boy or girlfriends with close same sex friends. However, parents also need to take time to listen to their teenager on these issues.

* **Discuss dating with your teenager**

Find out what you can about the person they plan to date. Select an appropriate time and place to do this when they will not be embarrassed, and when they are more likely to talk. Some good times are at bedtime or while driving together in the car. It is preferable to talk when other siblings are not around, and when there are few distractions or time pressures.

* **Set some rules about dating**

Develop some rules about what is permitted in one-on-one situations and other rules for group activities. Decide what places are acceptable, which days of the week these can occur, and set time limits for being home. During school terms discourage dates during the week. Where possible, make these rules known to your teenager’s current date (and their parents) to avoid misunderstandings and ensure consistency.

* **Help your teenager develop a plan to resist peer pressure to break the rules**

If you are concerned that your teenager may be pressured to take part in unwanted or unsafe sexual activity, they will need to have a plan to deal with this situation. Develop a plan that reduces the pressure to engage in sexual activity.

Some examples of the sort of things your teenager might plan to do or say when talking about sexual behaviour with a boy or girlfriend are listed below:

* Your teenager could plan to say they have promised their parent/s not to break the rules about what they can and cannot do
* Your teenager might plan to say they don’t want to go too far because they believe it is important for them to build the relationship slowly. They might also say that they know others who broke up after having sex and they do not want that to happen
* Other possibilities include health risks, being talked about by other peers as being available, or simply wanting to save themselves until they are sure about their commitment to their partner

Teenagers need to be given permission to hold to their decisions and now allow themselves to be persuaded to change their mind by others. Parents can help give teenagers that permission. Sometimes this will mean practising with them how to resist pressure.

* **Help your teenager practise their plan to resist peer pressure to break the rules**

Once your teenager has decided what to say if they are pressured to break the rules you have agreed on, get them to practice with you. Follow these steps:

* Pick a time when there is no one else around and you are not likely to be disturbed
* First, you play the role of a boy or girlfriend trying to get them to agree to sexual activity
* Encourage your teenager to practise saying to you what they have decided to say when they are pressured to break the rules

**WHAT TO DO IF YOUR TEENAGER IS ALREADY SEXUALLY ACTIVE**

* **Talk to your teenager**

Find an appropriate time to sit down and talk to your teenager when there is no one else around. Explain your concerns and try to keep calm. The goal is for you to discover how sexually active your teenager is, and whether they are taking precautions against disease or pregnancy. If you become angry or accusing, your teenager is unlikely to tell you the truth. You will then find it difficult to obtain accurate information from them.

If you can get your teenager to tell you what they are doing and who they are sexually active with, find ways to provide them with good information about the risks they may be taking.

You may wish to discuss with them the consequences of getting a Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) or raising a young child. They may have plans to study or work that could be disrupted and may be unaware of these consequences. If necessary, arrange for them to see your family doctor or make an appointment for them at a Sexual Health or Family Planning Clinic. God with them if they are willing to have you along, or help them to get there with transport or other assistance.**WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT OR DISCOVER THAT YOUR TEENAGER MAY BE GAY OR LESBIAN**

* **Talk to your teenager**

In general, follow the same strategy as described in the previous section. Some teenagers can be quite confused about their sexuality, and it may take them some time to sort it out. Your teenager may have decided that they are gay or lesbian, or they may deny it or be uncertain. They may be attracted to members of the same and opposite sex and experience emotions that they have trouble making sense of.

Most parents faced with this issue will find it very difficult to remain calm and objective. However, parents should resist the temptation to push their teenager one way or the other. The teenager will need to work out their sexuality for themselves. This may take some time. If parents are rigid and lay down conditions that force the teenager to adopt one form of sexual behaviour over another, they may make the situation worse. This can lead to family breakdown, lies and deception, misery and even suicide. The best plan is to encourage and assist your teenager to seek advice from a reputable source, such as the local Sexual Health Clinic.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOUR TEENAGER WONT TALK TO YOU ABOUT SEX OR DATING**

* **Ask another reliable adult to help**

If you and your teenager are not talking about sex and you are worried about what might be going on, consider asking your teenager to talk to another adult. A trusted friend or relative may be acceptable to you and your teenager, or consider asking your family doctor or the school counsellor. Sometimes, you will then find your teenager more willing to talk to you. However, sometimes this will not happen. They you may have to consider getting hold of an informative video or booklet to give them to look at by themselves if necessary.**KEY STEPS**

* Look for opportunities to talk with your teenager about sex
* Limit discussion to one or two issues
* Be prepared to talk about your own sexual experiences
* Get more information to answer your teenager’s questions
* Monitor your teenager’s reading and viewing
* Show interest in your teenager’s relationships
* Discuss dating with your teenager
* Set some rules about dating
* Develop a plan to resist peer pressure to break the rules
* Help your teenager practise their plan to resist peer pressure to break the rules
* Talk to your teenager
* Ask another reliable adult to help