



Making the **'Big Talk'** many small talks

Supporting conversations between parents and their children about relationships and sexuality



sexualwellbeing.ie





Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: 13-18 year olds resource was developed by the Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme (SHCPP), HSE Health & Wellbeing, Strategy and Research, in line with the National Sexual Health Strategy 2015-2020.

Available to download or order from healthpromotion.ie.

Further information and advice for parents on the topics of relationship and sexuality health can be accessed at sexualwellbeing.ie.

Our sincere thanks to colleagues in the following organisations and departments for their support in completing the resource:

- HSE Health Promotion and Improvement
- HSE Health & Wellbeing
- Irish College of General Practitioners.
- Irish Second-Level Students' Union
- National Parents' Council Primary
- National Parents' Council Post Primary
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
- Tusla (CYPSC and EPPI sections)
- Unwrapping Brilliance Limited

Table of Contents

Introduction	2	Sexual Activity	32
The difference between sex and sexuality	3	Sexual activity with self	32
Sex education and sexuality education	4	Sexual activity with others	32
Why talk to your teen about relationships and sexuality?	4	The law on young people's sexual activity	33
The common sexuality developmental needs of teens	6	Views on young people's sexual activity	33
		Conversations about readiness to engage in sexual activity	35
Physical development in adolescence	11	Sexual consent	36
Puberty	11	Safer sex	37
Physical care in adolescence	12	Contraception	38
		Sexually transmitted infections	38
Emotional development in adolescence	15	Unplanned teenage pregnancy	39
Stress	17	Risk-taking, alcohol, drugs and sex	40
Body image	18		
		Relationships and sexual activity in the online world	41
Sexuality development in adolescence	19	Meeting people online	42
Intersex	19	Sexting	43
Gender	19	Talking about sexualised and discriminatory media content, and pornography	44
Gender identity	20		
Gender stereotyping	20	Young people with an intellectual and/or physical disability	46
Transgender	20		
Attraction	21	Looking after yourself while parenting a teen	47
Sexual orientation	21	Where to get more help and information	48
LGB+ teenagers	22		
		Relationship development in adolescence	23
Intimacy	23	Intimacy	23
Healthy relationships, boundaries and consent	24	Healthy relationships, boundaries and consent	24
Unhealthy relationships	25	Unhealthy relationships	25
Sexual harassment	27	Sexual harassment	27
Relationships within the family	28	Relationships within the family	28
Friendships	29	Friendships	29
Dating relationships	30	Dating relationships	30
Teenage break-ups	31	Teenage break-ups	31

Introduction

This booklet was created to help you support your teenager to develop a healthy understanding of relationships and sexuality¹ as they move through adolescence into young adulthood.

Adolescence can be both an exciting and challenging phase for parents and teens. It is a time when young people try out new things and develop a deeper sense of themselves and their abilities. Your support is vital as they learn to build relationships and to express their sexuality in healthy ways. You can gently provide the structure and guidance they need to grow and mature, helping them face challenges, work things out and learn from their experiences.

In this way, they will develop the values, attitudes and behaviours necessary for them to be happy, healthy adolescents. This will lay the foundation for them to be happy, healthy adults.

This booklet is a general guide to common relationship and sexuality development between the ages of 13 and 18 years, which broadly reflects the post primary school years when young people are still living at home. However, it is important to note that young people of 18 years and over, are legally adults.

There is a lot of information covered so it would be a good idea to have an initial read, or flick-through of the booklet, and then dip in and out, as relevant to your child's current age and stage of development.



N.B. This booklet should be read in tandem with the previous booklet in the series, *Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: 8–12-year-olds*. The basics of puberty and adolescence are addressed there, and may still be relevant to your child.

1 The word sexuality is used in this booklet to refer to all aspects of a person's sexual development – physical, social and emotional. It is not restricted to sexual orientation and sexual activity.

The difference between sex and sexuality

Sex is what we do; sexuality is who we are

Anna Freud
(Psychoanalyst, 1895–1982)

People sometimes use the word 'sex' to describe whether a person is male or female, and also to refer to sexual contact or activity. Sexuality is a broader term, describing how we feel about and express ourselves as sexual beings. This includes how we form relationships with people in our lives and how we relate to our society. The Sexuality Wheel below gives an idea of the many elements that make up or influence a person's sexuality. It shows that our understanding and experience of our sexuality and how we express it in the world is a core part of who we are as human beings.



Sexuality Wheel reproduced with kind permission of 'Teachingsexualhealth.ca'

Sex education and sexuality education

The terms 'sex education' and 'sexuality education' are often used to describe the same thing. In Irish schools, the subject is referred to as Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). RSE is to emphasise that although it includes issues around sexual activity in the older years, it is about much more than that.

“Sexuality education is about knowing one's rights and respecting other people's rights, about protecting one's health, and about adopting a positive attitude towards sexuality and relationships. It is also about acquiring valuable life skills, such as self-confidence, critical thinking and the capacity to make informed decisions.”²



Why talk to your teen about relationships and sexuality?



As a parent you are continually sharing knowledge, attitudes and values with your child about the body, relationships and sexuality,³ whether or not you know it! Over the years of development these messages influence how your child thinks, feels and behaves. Research tells us that this influence on sexual behaviour can be positive when parents are an accurate source of information and support.

As they go into the teenage years, there is an increasing desire for independence and young people tend to gravitate towards their peers and the Internet for information and advice. These can be useful sources of information but parents and carers remain essential as caregivers, role models, educators and mentors throughout adolescence and young adulthood.⁴

Parent/child conversations about relationships and sexual activity do not increase the likelihood of young people becoming sexually active. Indeed, teenagers who generally have a positive, loving relationship with their parents have been found to talk more about these issues, and to engage less in sexual risk-taking behaviours.^{5 6}

2 Commissioner for Human Rights (2020) Human Rights Comment: Comprehensive sexuality education protects children and helps build a safer, inclusive society [Online]. Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/comprehensive-sexuality-education-protects-children-and-helps-build-a-safer-inclusive-society> (Accessed 28 September 2021).

3 Conlon, C. (2018) Supporting Parents Communicating with Children Aged 4–9 Years about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up. Dublin: HSE Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme.

4 Albert, B. (2012) With One Voice 2012: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy. Washington DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

5 Parkes, A., Henderson, M., Wight, D. and Nixon, C. (2011) 'Is parenting associated with teenagers' early sexual risk-taking, autonomy and relationship with sexual partners?' *Perspect Sex Reprod Health*, 43(1), p30-40.

6 Nolan, A. and Smyth, E. (2020) 'Talking about sex and sexual behaviour of young people in Ireland', [Report], ESRI, 2020-11-10, ESRI Research Series;112

Within these close relationships, teenagers are more likely to:

- delay having first sex if they believe their parents would like them to;
- practise safer sex when they become sexually active;
- have a clearer idea of what they do and don't want in a relationship;
- be able to set boundaries and respect other people's boundaries.

Some parents might feel relationships and sexuality education is the responsibility of schools and youth services. In reality schools, parents and community supports like youth services provide different types of support, and all are necessary. Schools and youth services can offer a safe space for young people to get information and to have facilitated discussions about relationship and sexuality topics with people of their own age, while parents can offer more individualised support, based on their unique knowledge of their child's needs and stage of development. Getting a variety of perspectives and supports will help the young person to flourish.

The importance of both parents, if co-parenting

Where a young person is being co-parented (whether by parents living together or apart, by grandparents, etc.) it is very important that all adults involved in their parenting are clear about the approach being taken. All should be involved in the conversations because, while there may be some issues more easily addressed by a same-gender parent, young people will benefit from having multiple perspectives.

Despite having equal need of guidance around relationships and sexuality development, boys generally receive less information and support, both at home and in school. Furthermore, Irish and international research tells us boys would like to hear from their fathers as well as their mothers, but that many fathers feel it is not their role, or that they are not equipped or comfortable to have these conversations.⁷

Many young people want to be able to talk to their parents about relationships and sexuality, even if doesn't always seem that way! The key is to persist in initiating small conversations and signposting young people to additional sources of information and support.

Whatever your gender or your child's gender, you have an important role in their relationships and sexuality development. Staying silent may well be communicating unintended negative messages about a range of issues – not least gender roles and normal bodily functions.



⁷ Nolan, A. and Smyth, E. (2020) 'Talking about sex and sexual behaviour of young people in Ireland', [Report], ESRI, 2020-11-10, ESRI Research Series;112

Facing the challenge

Think back to where you heard about relationships, sex and sexuality. Many parents in Ireland report receiving little relationships and sexuality education themselves, instead muddling through, and often getting information that wasn't right or helpful. They, and you, can make sure your children have a better experience.

Talking with your adolescent about relationships and sexuality may seem a daunting task, especially if we think of it as the 'Big Talk'. This 'Big Talk' approach is not helpful to parents or young people. In what other important area of life would we rely on one conversation, piling on the pressure to get it 'right'? The truth is that there isn't one 'right' conversation; what's needed are loads and loads of small conversations and interactions over the years that will be a mixture of awkward, flowing, unsettling, funny, rewarding, unfinished, bonding – and more! Together, these conversations will be a part of the overall loving support that will help your child on their journey to adulthood.



See the end of this booklet for sources of support.

The truth is that there isn't one 'right' conversation; what's needed are loads and loads of small conversations and interactions over the years

The common sexuality developmental needs of teens

Adolescence is the time when young people begin to understand, and to try and connect, their various identities in an effort to form a secure sense of who they are. The range of development between the ages of 13 and 18 is broad. People of 13 are still young teenagers, while those of 18 are at the end of their adolescent journey. It is useful to have some idea of what is generally going on for teenagers of these ages in terms of their sexuality development.

Some key features in adolescent growth and development^{8,9}

Ages 13–14 years

- Physical pubertal changes continue (see previous booklet in this series, *Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: 8–12-year-olds*).
- Ability to express themselves and their feelings increases.
- Interest in privacy increases; they may be more physically modest.
- May be more self-conscious and more concerned about being 'normal'.
- May explore (or further confirm) their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.
- More likely to experience sexual thoughts, feelings and attraction.
- Increased concern with their attractiveness to others.
- Increasing desire for independence from parents and families – they often test rules and boundaries.
- Resist public (and sometimes private) shows of affection from parents/carers.
- More interested in, and influenced by, friends.
- Brain development allows them to understand and problem-solve more than before. However, the brain is not fully developed until a person's early twenties.
- Begin to think more abstractly (to be able to understand more complex ideas that aren't tied to physical objects and experiences).
- Tend to focus on the present and have limited interest in the future.
- More likely to engage in risky behaviours as they explore their emerging interests and capabilities.

Ages 15–16 years

- Puberty, which can take up to four years from when it starts, may be completed.
- Eating habits can become sporadic, including skipping meals and late-night eating.
- Concern with appearance and one's body can increase
- Abstract thinking ability and moral reasoning can increase
- Engagement with parents may decline, and testing of rules and limits often occurs.
- Risk-taking behaviours may emerge (experimenting with tobacco, drugs, alcohol) and risk-takers can see themselves as invincible.
- Peer relationships become even more important as social networks expand.
- Sense of sexual orientation becomes more solid, however sexual behaviours do not always match sexual identity.
- Experimentation with relationships and sexual behaviours may begin or continue.

Ages 17–18 years

- Young people usually reach full physical development.
- Ability to function independently increases.
- Emotional steadiness increases.
- Social networks expand and new friendships are formed, as well as increasingly diverse networks of peers.
- Greater sense of body image and gender role is likely.
- Risk-taking behaviours may emerge (experimenting with tobacco, drugs, alcohol, reckless driving).
- Experimentation with relationships and sexual behaviours may begin or continue.
- Greater feelings of love and more serious relationships may develop.
- Many young people have a secure sense of their sexual orientation at this stage.

8 https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Normal-Adolescent-Development-Part-I-057.aspx

9 Adolescent Sexual Development -Michigan Department of Community Health (2009).

The six Cs of positive youth development¹⁰

Most parents want their children to grow up to be happy, healthy and fulfilled, caring and respectful of themselves and others. This should apply to their relationships and to the expression of their sexuality, just as much as to any other aspect of their lives.

International research has identified six core overlapping qualities or 'assets' that can contribute to positive youth development (PYD).

The 'assets' are: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Caring, Contribution. The model can help us think about how we can support young people in developing a healthy approach to relationships and sexuality. The table below offers some suggestions for how it might be applied.

1: Competence

Feeling that you have abilities and skills

Some things you could do

Provide opportunities for your teen to develop age-appropriate skills by taking responsibility for themselves and others. For example, bit by bit, they can be given more responsibility about their personal care and hygiene, and their online and offline safety. They can contribute to the running of the family by taking care of siblings or pets and doing other household chores. They can be helped to develop information-seeking and help-seeking skills so they can begin to operate safely in the world and move towards independence. This includes accessing trustworthy sources of information on relationships and sexuality issues.

2: Confidence

A sense of self-worth and that you have the power to make things happen

Some things you could do

Develop your teen's self-worth by listening to them and valuing their thoughts and opinions. Provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for them to make decisions and to have those decisions respected. Support them to follow through on decisions they make. As confidence is closely linked to competence, enable them to develop a range of skills and abilities with regard to relationship-building and taking care of their sexuality health (this booklet will give you some ideas to start with).

10 McNeely, C. and Blanchard, J. (2009) The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development. Baltimore: Centre for Adolescent Health at John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

3: Connection

Positive bonds with family, friends, school, sports/other interest groups, wider community, etc. (people and institutions)

Some things you could do

Promote the development of qualities that support healthy relationships such as honesty, respect, empathy, trust, loyalty and compassion. Show by example how to connect respectfully with other people.

Build positive relationships within the family and beyond. At mealtimes, create a listening environment to encourage all family members to talk about their day and whatever is going on for them. Encourage and support your child to build healthy relationships outside of the family too, in school and in after-school activities.

4: Character

A sense of right and wrong (morality), integrity, and respect

Some things you could do

Provide opportunities for your teen to practise value-based decision-making and self-control, and to develop spirituality (a sense of connection with a bigger purpose). Establish and hold boundaries with your child; act respectfully and expect respectful behaviour in return. This will help them to develop the attitudes, values and skills to set and express their own boundaries and to respect the boundaries of other people. This underpins the practice of consent in all relationships.

5: Caring

A sense of sympathy and empathy for others

Some things you could do

Demonstrate empathy and caring for others in your family and beyond. Encourage your teen to find opportunities to practise empathy, compassion and caring in day-to-day activities with younger children, friends, family members, older people, vulnerable groups, diverse groups, and in relation to the environment. This will also help them to develop their consent-seeking and consent-giving practices, as they will care how the other person is and will expect the same in return.

6: Contribution

Active participation and leadership in a variety of settings

Some things you could do

Encourage your teen to understand how personal relationships, wider communities and societies benefit from the connections made between people and the contributions they make to each other. Help them to develop their sense of social justice and to find opportunities to contribute to their family, friends, school, special interest groups and through wider volunteering.

Talking to your teen – general tips



✓ Start conversations about important topics as early as you can

Maintain open communication about healthy relationships, sexuality, consent, sexual activity and safety. Starting these conversations early, in a way that's suitable for your child's age and stage of maturity, makes your job during adolescence easier. **But remember, it's never too late to start.**

✓ Carve out time together

As your teen moves towards independence, the things you used to do together may no longer appeal to them. Find ways of spending time with your child during the normal course of the day and try to develop new shared interests. Spending time together provides opportunities to talk about everyday issues, and opportunities to have those important, deeper conversations. **Keep conversations with your teen as positive as possible.** Highlight their strengths and positive qualities whenever possible.

✓ Help your teen anticipate the changes associated with puberty and adolescence

Bit by bit, explain to your child the types of changes that are ahead of them. Reassure them that the physical, emotional and psychological changes they experience are generally part of a wide range of what is considered normal, healthy development. Teenagers may be confused or worried by the increase in sexual thoughts and feelings they experience, so you may wish to mention that this is normal during adolescence.

✓ Set clear limits with reasonable expectations

Communicate clear, reasonable expectations about things like behaviour, media use, engagement with education, etc. These will help protect your child as you gradually expand their opportunities for more independence in line with their growing maturity.

✓ Try not to 'fix' things

As much as possible, help your teen develop the knowledge and skills that will help them problem-solve, rather than telling them what to do or leaping in to fix things yourself. Give, or help them find, accurate information about relationships and sexuality and help them to work through issues. Gradually prepare them for independent decision-making, but remind them you are there to help when needed.

✓ Discuss potentially risky behaviours and their consequences

Discussing possible risky behaviours regarding issues like sexual activity and substance use can help your teen to consider their response to possible situations and to rehearse decision-making skills ahead of time. This will help them when situations arise. Try to set a positive example in relation to healthy behaviours.

✓ Share some of your own life experience

Your young people may benefit from hearing some of your own life experiences. Share what is useful and relevant and what you are comfortable with them knowing. It is not necessary, or even advisable, to 'tell all'.

✓ Take a step back and breathe

When it comes to discussing issues of relationships and sexuality with your child, try to be calm. Don't be put off by embarrassment. Admitting that you are both feeling a bit awkward, and yet willing to carry on talking and listening, is a valuable life lesson in itself.

Physical development in adolescence

Puberty



Some things to know

Puberty is when a child's body begins to change into that of an adult, capable of reproduction. Hormones are released leading to rapid change physically, emotionally and socially. Young people aged 13 or so will generally have already begun puberty, and by the time they are 18 they will generally have completed this developmental stage. Puberty can take up to four years from onset to completion. It is very important that young people understand how their bodies are developing into adult bodies and how that process brings new responsibilities for self-care.

See the previous booklet in this series, [*Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: 8-12-year-olds*](#) for detail on the basics of what happens during puberty and how you might support your child through it.



Female bodies 13-18 years

Normal pubertal development will continue and generally be completed during these years. Your child will grow taller, their shoulders and hips will broaden, and their breasts will continue to grow.

The age puberty starts depends on a wide range of factors but most girls will get their first period between the ages of 8 and 16, with the average age being 12-13. The first period usually happens within two years or so of breast budding, and while your child's menstrual cycle will be irregular at first, it should settle into a pattern within two years.

While we are used to thinking of a 28-day cycle, many people have healthy menstrual cycles lasting between 21 and 40 days. Bleeding may be heavy at first and may be painful, but this should settle and pain should be manageable with the use of over-the-counter painkillers. Period problems that are prolonged and interfere with everyday life should be discussed with your doctor.



Male bodies 13-18 years

Normal pubertal development will continue and generally be completed during these years. Testosterone surges between the ages of 14 and 16, increasing muscle mass and setting off a growth spurt. The voice deepens and the penis continues to enlarge. Testosterone levels in males are usually eight times greater than in females, resulting in greater sexual drive as well as frequency of sexual thoughts and behaviour.



What you might do

Talk to your doctor if your child's experience of puberty doesn't broadly fit with the norm. This doesn't necessarily mean there is a problem, but it's good to get it checked out.

- For females, this includes showing no signs of puberty by age 14; if their periods haven't arrived within three years after the first signs of breast development (budding); or if they have ongoing period pain and heavy blood loss that interferes with their everyday activities.
- For males, this includes showing no signs of puberty by age 14, or if there are no other signs of puberty after the initial growth spurt.

Physical care in adolescence



Some things to know

Your teenager will already have taken on more self-care by this stage and will continue to do so, in line with their understanding and ability. It's important that adolescents acquire the knowledge and skills to take care of their developing bodies, as many lifestyle habits developed during the teen years can have positive and negative health effects well into their future.

Personal hygiene

As they change and grow physically, young people should be familiar with their body and be able to keep it clean and healthy. In addition to the health implications, paying attention to their physical hygiene and grooming will contribute to their self-confidence and to their social acceptance (see previous booklet for information on hygiene during puberty, including care of the genital area). There is a wide range of grooming products available but most basic hygiene needs can be met with the use of shampoo, soap, deodorant and (if appropriate) menstrual care products such as pads, tampons, menstrual cups and period underwear.



Body Awareness

As they take on more responsibility for their own physical care, young people should also learn to pay attention to what their body looks and feels like so they can be aware of unexpected changes and seek help if they need to check anything out.

- **Female Bodies:** The type of breast self-examination (BSE) advised for older people is not generally recommended in the teen years because the breasts are growing and changing, and can even be different at various points throughout the menstrual cycle because of hormonal changes. However, it is useful for young people to know what their breasts generally look and feel like so they have an idea of what is and isn't usual for them, and can seek advice if necessary.

It is also advisable for teens to know what their genitals look and feel like. This will help them become more comfortable with their body and to recognise if changes occur that may need to be investigated.

- **Male bodies:** It is important for teens to check their testicles on a regular basis and be aware of the symptoms of testicular cancer. Although it is rare, it is one of the few cancers that more frequently affects younger people (15-34 is the most common age range). Young men can also experience testicular torsion, where blood flow to the testicle is disrupted. Severe or lasting pain and swelling in the abdomen and genital area should always be checked out by a doctor as a matter of urgency.

Importance of exercise, good nutrition and sleep to physical development

Eating well; getting a range of exercise; and sleeping sufficiently are all important for everyone's health and wellbeing, but are even more so for adolescents. During adolescence, young people experience an accelerated rate of physical change and development which needs adequate nourishment. It is also a time when they can establish their own, independent healthy lifestyle habits that will support them throughout adult life.

Vaccines

It is important that your child's vaccines are up to date to protect them from preventable illnesses. All children are offered the following vaccines, free of charge, in first year of post-primary school:

- A tetanus, low-dose diphtheria and low-dose pertussis (whooping cough) ([Tdap](#)) non-live booster vaccine.
- The Meningococcal ACWY ([MenACWY](#)) non-live vaccine offers protection to young people from life-threatening meningococcal group A, C, W and Y infections.
- The [HPV \(Human Papillomavirus\) non-live vaccine](#) protects against almost all cases of cervical cancer, 7 out of 10 vaginal and 5 out of 10 vulval cancers, 9 out of 10 HPV-related anal cancers, and 9 out of 10 cases of genital warts. Two doses of the vaccine are given, usually with 6 months in between.





What you might do

- Talk to your child about the need to take additional care of their growing body as they go through the adolescent years, and provide them with the necessary hygiene products. Source web-based or book-based information so they can look up information for themselves (see the 'Information and Support' section at the end of this booklet).
 - **For all children:** Encourage your child to get to know their body and emphasise the need to check in with you or another trusted adult if they are worried or concerned about anything.
 - **For boys:** introduce the need to do a regular testicular self-check, reassuring them that testicular cancer is actually rare. Ensure they know to seek medical advice if they experience severe or ongoing pain in their genital area.
- See the following resources for information about testicular check.
- 
- <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/5/cancer/patient/leaflets/testicular%20cancer%20leaflet.pdf>
- <https://youtube/dD6ZXrUQtWA>
- Encourage your child to eat a wide range of foods, especially vegetables. Involve them in food preparation so they can gain the knowledge and skills to cook for themselves and others. For more information see <https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/healthy-eating-for-families.html>
 - <https://www.safefood.net/healthy-eating/family-health/teenagers>
 - Encourage your child to take regular exercise of various kinds. See <https://www2.hse.ie/healthy-eating-active-living/exercise/>
 - Encourage and support your adolescent to avoid starting, or to quit smoking or vaping. In addition to harming their overall health, nicotine in any form, can harm their developing brain. Smoking is a serious health risk at any stage of life so, if you are a smoker, consider quitting, for your own sake, and for the sake of your child and others around you. For information and support see: <https://www2.hse.ie/quit-smoking/>
 - Encourage your child to get adequate and good quality sleep.
 - Use trustworthy and evidence-based sources of information to familiarise yourself and your child with the range and benefits of vaccines available to them. Involve them in the decision-making as appropriate to their age and maturity.



Emotional development in adolescence



Some things to know

Adolescents can experience intense emotions with puberty. Researchers have found that the increase of testosterone in both boys and girls affects part of the brain associated with emotions, social acceptance and reward.¹¹ This emotional upheaval is part of a teenager's journey towards being able to feel, understand and regulate their emotions. This does not mean they should suppress emotions but can feel and express them, without necessarily having to act on them.

For most of the teenage years young people are largely working from the back of their brain (the amygdala), which is associated with instinct and emotion, rather than the front (the pre-frontal cortex), which allows them to think logically and work out risk and consequences.

Because young people's brain development is not completed until their twenties, their responses to life situations may seem inconsistent, puzzling, and frustrating, to adults.

A potential source of confusion for some young people, and for the adults around them, is that age doesn't always indicate the pace of an individual's development. A young person can seem mature in some ways while quite immature in others, and there can be a big difference in maturity between teenagers of the same age.

To complicate things further, some young people develop physically, well in advance of their emotional and cognitive development. This can lead to a mismatch between how they look, how they act and how they are treated, by adults and other young people. It's important to remember that even though they may look like, and want to be treated as, an adult; adolescents are still developing and need lots of love, guidance and support.

¹¹ Peper, J.S. and Dahl, R.E. (2013) 'Surging Hormones: Brain-Behavior Interactions During Puberty.' *Curr Dir Psychol Sci*, 22(2), p134-139.

Some things that may affect your teen's emotional well-being and mood include:

- Inadequate sleep, too little exercise and poor nutrition (irregular meal patterns and skipping meals), can lead to moodiness, gloominess, irritability and a tendency to overreact.
- Hormonal and other developmental changes that make it difficult for them to understand and manage their emotions.
- Concerns about being 'normal'; for instance, their pace of physical development might be out of step with their peers and this can be a source of sensitivity and heightened emotions.
- The normal ups and downs of social or romantic relationships can also lead to a rollercoaster of emotions.

N.B. It is normal for teenagers to experience heightened moods and emotions. However, if you become concerned at the level of your child's mental distress, and it interferes with their everyday life, talk to your GP. If necessary, ask for a referral to youth-specific mental health or psychological support services.



What you might do

As a baseline, encourage your child to eat a range of healthy foods and get sufficient exercise and sleep. You might consider a house rule against having phones in bedrooms overnight, as an aid to everyone's sleep routine.

Give them the repeated, encouraging experience of being listened to and respected. When they talk about their feelings, hold back from the understandable urge to immediately offer advice and solutions. Their need is often to vent and be heard.

Be careful not to dismiss the real angst your child may be experiencing, even if it seems illogical to you. Reinforce the message that it's normal to feel a range of emotions, sometimes without an obvious cause. Help them to build their emotional vocabulary by naming feelings in your routine conversations, for example, 'You seem /I am ...happy/frustrated/excited/anxious/angry/discouraged/sad', etc.

Talk about ways you manage your emotions and support them to find their own coping mechanisms, such as: talking to trusted adults and friends; getting and giving physical affection, like hugs; listening to and/or playing music; exercising; journaling; gaming; playing with pets; etc.

Set sensible rules and limits for your child to provide a safe base from which they can explore and develop. These should not be rigid and should change in line with their growing ability to make reasoned decisions.

Above all, encourage your child to be self-compassionate, to accept that they are 'good enough'. The difficulties, and even failure, that we all experience are a necessary part of trying new things and learning.

Stress



Some things to know

There are levels of stress that are good for us and help us rise to a challenge. However, when stress is ongoing and interferes with everyday functioning, it becomes a problem.

Teenagers experience stress more quickly than adults. This is because the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain that calmly assesses danger and calls off the stress response, is not fully developed. There are many different triggers of stress for teenagers. Many stressors occur in their relationships with others, such as fear of judgement and unmet expectations, etc.

It is helpful to be able to recognise signs that your teenager might be stressed. Some signs include complaints of headaches, tiredness, withdrawal, increased anger outbursts, lashing out at others, crying more often, feeling hopeless, difficulty concentrating, chronic anxiety and nervousness, or changes in sleeping and/or eating habits.



What you might do

Teach your teen helpful stress management strategies:

- Maintain enjoyable activities, including regular physical activity.
- Talk about problems with others.
- Take deep breaths, accompanied by thinking or saying aloud, 'I can handle this'.
- Become familiar with, and practise, relaxation techniques that work for them.
- Focus on what they can control (their actions and reactions) and try to let go of what they cannot (other people's opinions and expectations).
- Visualise and practise dealing with situations that cause them anxiety and, if possible, work through their worst-case scenarios.
- Practise self-acceptance – identifying and building on their strengths, while challenging and lowering unrealistic expectations.

Body image



Some things to know

In adolescence, many young people become more aware of their appearance and of what other people think of them. This can lead to an increased focus on personal grooming, and in some cases, to increased pressure to look a certain way. This may all take a lot of time and attention, distracting from other interests and responsibilities. Young people may get a lot of positive or negative attention for their looks. In both instances, it may give the message that their appearance is far more important than all their other qualities and achievements. It may also increase the pressure on them to spend a lot of time and money on goods and services to 'improve' their bodies.

Teenagers often feel self-conscious about their appearance. It can affect their self-esteem, their relationships, and their quality of life. It's important for caring adults to pay attention to any changes in behaviour that would indicate the development of a significant problem. These might include social withdrawal, obsessive concerns about appearance, eating disorders, excessive focus on muscle gain, use of body-building steroids, and signs of anxiety or depression.

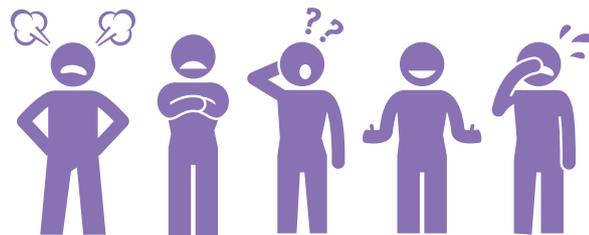


What you might do

Pay attention to signs that indicate how your teenager is doing, both physically and emotionally. Actively listen to concerns and gently encourage them to appreciate their body and all it can do, focussing on health rather than just appearance. If possible, exercise together and involve them in preparing healthy, tasty food. Find opportunities to draw attention to the many ways images on social media are engineered and do not reflect most people's everyday reality. Seek advice from your GP if you think your child is in need of professional support.



'Pay attention to signs that indicate how your teenager is doing, both physically and emotionally.'



Sexuality development in adolescence



Some things to know

Your child's understanding and expression of their sexuality has been developing since birth, but this accelerates during adolescence. The positive development of sexual identity involves, among other things, a healthy understanding, acceptance and expression of one's gender and sexual orientation. Adolescence can be a time of experimentation with different sexual and gender identities and expressions. This can be seen in choices around clothes, make-up, jewellery, piercings, friendship-groups, relationships, etc.



What you might do

You can help your teenager to form a healthy self-identity by accepting them, encouraging their self-expression and respecting the differences between you. Growing up in a positive and accepting environment will allow your child to be who they are, and will encourage them to be accepting and inclusive of other people.

You can provide, or help your teen to find, honest and accurate information about gender, sexual orientation, relationships and sexual activity. It is also important to help them to work through this information to see how it supports their development.

Intersex

Intersex people are born with variations in their sexual anatomy, in their chromosomes, or in their hormonal patterns, that are not typical of male or female bodies. There are many ways people can experience being Intersex and the range of supports possibly needed will depend on each individual's situation. If your child is Intersex, your G.P. and Belong To Youth Services will be able to offer advice and signpost you to other services as appropriate.

Gender¹²

Gender is one element of a person's identity. Traditionally, people have been placed in one of two categories – male or female. We call this the gender binary (binary meaning 'two'). This assumes that someone is a man if they are born with what are considered male genitalia and reproductive organs, and someone is a woman if they are born with what are considered female genitalia and reproductive organs. When someone is assigned male or female at birth this is known as their *sex assigned at birth*. Most people's gender identity fits with their sex assigned at birth; this is called being *cisgender*. However, in recent times we have come to understand that gender identity exists along a broader spectrum.

¹² <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/gender-and-health>

Gender identity

How we understand and express our gender identity is a process that starts when we are very young, but adolescence is the most significant phase of 'gender identity acquisition'. Everyone has a gender identity – it is a person's inner sense of being a man, woman, neither, or both. Sometimes people like to express their gender identity in non-traditional ways, through the way they act or the clothes they wear. This doesn't necessarily mean they identify as a different gender to the one they were given at birth.

Gender stereotyping

Gender stereotyping is a generalised view about how women or men should look and behave. Because its influence is widespread in most cultures, it impacts on everyone – even people who don't identify as either a man or woman. Being exposed to gender stereotyping on a daily basis from childhood can give us a narrow sense of what gender is and how it should be expressed. It can limit our development in all aspects of life: relationships, education and careers.

Transgender

Transgender or trans is a term describing a person whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex at birth. This word is also used as an umbrella term to describe people who don't fit within conventional expectations of gender identity or expression.

Some transgender people identify as men or women. This might mean someone who was assigned male at birth feeling their true identity is as a woman, or vice versa. However, some transgender people feel they are neither a man nor a woman (agender); they are both (bigender); or their identity changes (gender fluid). Some people simply describe themselves as being non-binary (meaning their gender identity is neither exclusively woman or man or is in between or beyond the gender binary). Many transgender people have a sense of their gender identity in childhood. However, the physical changes of puberty may emphasise the mismatch between their assigned sex and their sense of who they really are. Transgender adolescents may need additional care and support in negotiating the physical and societal challenges they face in these years.



What you might do

- Support and encourage your child to develop and express their gender identity in a way that promotes their overall well-being.
- Consider the impact of gender stereotyping on your teen, and challenge its limiting effect when possible.
- You may be transgender yourself and/or know a lot about transgender identities. If not, you could inform yourself and consider how you can encourage an inclusive home environment where difference is accepted and celebrated.
- Consider how you might wish to respond if your teen came out to you as transgender. How best could you show your love and support? Thinking about these things in advance might help you respond in a positive, supportive way.
- Anticipate any additional emotional or practical support your teen may need if they identify as transgender. It might be useful to talk to your GP, and to your child's school, to ensure your child receives any support they may need. You may wish to talk to [BeLong To Youth Services](#) to get information for you and your child see: <https://www.belongto.org/trans-resources/>

Attraction



Some things to know

Adolescence is a time when many young people experience their first serious physical and emotional attraction to someone, and may have their first relationship. This can bring pleasure and happiness, and may also be the source of upset. At this time, it is useful for teenagers to begin to understand that, although it may be a part of a loving relationship, attraction is different to love. They should also know that attraction is only one of the factors to be taken into account when deciding to be in a relationship; it's possible to be attracted to someone who is not good for us.



What you might do

Talk to your teenager about what it is like to feel attracted to another person. Explore with them what it is like when the feeling is returned and when it isn't, and help them to find ways to manage themselves in both situations. It may be helpful to share parts of your own experience. The emotions can be intense so it's important not to dismiss or make fun of their feelings or the relationship.

Sexual orientation



Some things to know

Sexual orientation is a term used to describe someone's emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to other people. During adolescence, teenagers often experience attraction for the first time. They may get a strong, lasting sense of their sexual orientation, or may get an emerging sense that will develop over time. The following are some of the sexual orientations with which most people identify:

- Men who are attracted to women, and women who are attracted to men, are called 'heterosexual' or 'straight'.
- Women who are attracted to women are called 'lesbian' (**L**).
- Men who are attracted to men are called 'gay' (**G**).
- Somebody who is 'bisexual' is attracted to more than one gender (**B**).

However, there is a much wider range of ways people describe their sexual orientation, so the term '**LGB+**' is sometimes used to describe this.



What you might do

Be aware and sensitive to the possibility that your child may be experiencing romantic and sexual attraction and that it may give rise to a range of feelings. Try to be in a good relationship with them so they have a sounding-board to help them work through whatever may be going on for them. Be open to the possibility that your child's sexual orientation may be the same or different to yours and be prepared to respond supportively whatever the case.



What you might do (continued)

- You may be LGB+ yourself and/or may have a good understanding of the range of sexual orientations. If not, talk to LGB+ friends and family, if they are willing, or find other ways to inform yourself about LGB+ sexual orientations.
- Consider how you might wish to respond if your teen came out to you as LGB+. How best could you show your love and care? Thinking about these things in advance might help you respond in the positive, supportive way that you'd like.
- Create a home environment where respect and acceptance of difference is part of everyday life. In this way, your child will know they will be met with love and kindness whenever they want to talk to you about important aspects of their life, including their sexual orientation.

Coming out as LGBT+



Some things to know

'Coming out' is the term used by LGBT+ people to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to others. Coming out can be challenging for a young person, filled with mixed emotions. They may want to be honest with the people around them about who they are, while also fearing rejection by family and friends.

'Coming out' isn't usually just one event. Because there is still an assumption that people are heterosexual and cisgender, LGBT+ people have to decide if, to whom and when to come out all through their lives. Research shows that many LGBT+ people are aware of their sexual orientation around the age of 12 and may be aware of their gender identity much earlier but may delay telling anyone until much later. Keeping an essential part of themselves hidden can put a strain on young LGBT+ people.

Some LGBT+ young people really struggle with self-acceptance, as well as struggling with being accepted by others. This can be particularly hurtful if they are not accepted by their family and peers. Research shows that isolation, rejection, depression and thoughts of suicide are more prominent in LGBT+ youth than in straight teens. Many LGBT+ young people also experience discrimination and violence, either verbal or physical. This can seriously affect their well-being and mental health.



What you might do

- Be cautious about making assumptions about your child's sexual orientation based on LGBT+ stereotypes, or 'outing' them (telling people about their sexual orientation or gender identity without their consent).
- If your child identifies as LGBT+ they may need additional information and support, especially if they experience hostile or discriminatory responses. You may wish to talk to [BeLong To Youth services](#). Your local youth service may also have a LGBT+ group.
- A teen 'coming out' as LGBT+ can be challenging for a parent, particularly if they haven't considered the possibility. Give yourself time to come to terms with the new situation. While you do this, be mindful that your child needs your support now more than ever. See the [BeLong To Coming Out Guide for Parents](#) and [Supporting Families in Transition](#) guide.

Relationship development in adolescence



Some things to know

Changes in a teenager's physical and brain development bring changes in their relationships with people in the home, school and community. Teenagers want more independence from their parents and often shift their focus to friends. However, research tells us that parents remain influential during these years.

During childhood and adolescence, it is important for your child to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to build and maintain positive relationships with family and friends,

and possibly within an intimate/dating relationship. They also need to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to identify unhealthy relationships and to recognise the impact these can have on well-being.

For more information see: <https://www2.hse.ie/healthy-you/walk-away-from-the-relationship-monster.html>

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/feelings-emotions/being-assertive/>

Intimacy



Some things to know

Intimacy refers to an emotional closeness between people that is built over time. It relies on affection, caring, trust and the ability to be vulnerable. Intimacy is usually first experienced with parents and then within same-gender friendships. The capacity to be intimate can later be applied in romantic relationships. Older teens are capable of more intimate relationships than younger teens.

Sometimes the phrase 'intimate relationship' is used as if it means the same thing as 'sexual relationship'. In reality there may or may not be intimacy in a sexual relationship. To reduce the risk of emotional hurt it's important people know what they and their partner want from, and will give to, a relationship.



Healthy relationships, boundaries and consent



While there are some qualities specific to a particular type of relationship, all healthy relationships are based on mutual respect, and the ability to assert and observe appropriate boundaries.

This describes the basic concept of **'consent'**, where people know, and can communicate, their wants and rights, while respecting that other people have their own wants and rights.

'Consent' is sometimes purely associated with sexual activity, but the principle of consent underpins all healthy relationships and can be taught from the early years on (see two previous booklets in this series, *Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: 4–7-year-olds* and *Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: 8–12-year-olds*).

During adolescence, young people will move towards taking more responsibility for themselves and for how they treat others.

Parents can guide and influence the development of attitudes, values and behaviours that will enable them to do this in a healthy way.

In respectful relationships each person considers what the other wants and no one tries to control the other. When young people share interests, they find doing things together is enjoyable and no one is forced to do anything they don't want. Being together is generally supportive and each person is free to have their own friends and interests outside the relationship.

All relationships can have their ups and downs, but teenagers should be aware of the signs of a relationship being fundamentally unhealthy. Signs include: one or both partners demonstrating over-dependence on the other, a lack of respect, controlling behaviour/dress/friendships, feeling jealous, anxious or scared a lot of the time and acting out of these feelings. It is important for your teenager to know the signs of unhealthy relationships so they can seek help if needed.

'consent', where people know, and can communicate, their wants and rights, while respecting that other people have their own wants and rights.

Unhealthy relationships

Bullying



Some things to know

Bullying is an aggressive, intentional act or behaviour that is carried out repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend themselves. Bullying can take many forms, including verbal attacks on/about a person, physical assault, damage of property, exclusion from groups, etc. Bullying can happen in person, online (cyber-bullying), or both.

Online bullying has the additional power of being able to reach into a young person's world at all times, even when they are at home and should feel safe.

If a teen is being bullied or is bullying, there is a vital role parents need to play in resolving the situation and helping the young people involved.

If your teen is being bullied

Some signs your child might be bullied include damaged or missing belongings, unexplained injuries or torn clothes, lack of friends, frequent claims of having lost things, fear of school or of leaving the house, avoiding places, people or activities, avoiding usual routes to places, poor appetite, headaches, stomach aches, mood swings, trouble sleeping, lack of interest in schoolwork, talk about suicide, or uncharacteristic aggression toward family members.



What you might do



It is never easy to admit to being bullied so create a space for your teen to confide in you. Listen and avoid rushing to intervene as it may make things worse. If the bullying is happening in a school or club, consider checking out their anti-bullying policies and talking to appropriate members of staff.

If the bullying is online, your first instinct may be to insist they come off their devices, but this can seem that they are being unfairly punished. Try to remain calm, listen to them and work through possible options. If the incident is a once-off action by a stranger it may be enough to take a screenshot and block the person.

If it continues, you may choose to report it to the online platform and request that posts are deleted and the person banned. If the behaviour is threatening or doesn't stop, you can report it to An Garda Síochána.

If the behaviour is by people known to them (peers or friends), support your teen to avoid responding with equally bad behaviour; keep a record or take screenshots that prove what happened and when; and clearly ask the harasser to stop. If it continues you can report it to the online platform, to the school, youth service, sports club, etc. as appropriate, and to An Garda Síochána. See <https://tacklebullying.ie/> for additional information and support.

If your teen is bullying someone else

You may know or suspect your teen is bullying someone. This might be because it has been reported to you or because you've noticed things about their behaviour that have aroused your suspicion, e.g. having more money/possessions than they should, talking about another young person harshly or excluding them from a friendship group, and/or being additionally anxious to keep you away from their online devices.



What you might do

Don't dismiss suspicions or reports of bullying. It may be hard to believe your child could be involved, but most people are capable of behaving badly at times. By the same token, try not to assume your child's guilt before hearing from them and from any other people involved. Talk to your teen about the situation and give them a chance to tell you what's going on from their perspective. Although emotions may be running high, try to model respectful behaviour so your child knows that even difficult situations can be handled without aggression.

If your child is bullying it's important they take responsibility for their actions, but also that they are helped to work through why they are behaving in this way and how they can be supported to stop. Depending on where the bullying took place and who is involved, this might mean working with staff in your child's school, youth service, etc.

If you think your teen needs additional professional help with managing their emotions and behaviour, talk to your GP about getting a referral to an appropriate service. See <https://tacklebullying.ie/> for additional information and support.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is an abuse of power, rather than about sexual desire, and it may be considered a form of bullying or violence.

Sexual harassment may include unwanted and non-consensual sexual banter, jokes, questions, insults, comments, and displaying sexual images in shared spaces. It might also include the non-consensual taking, posting or sending of sexual images and messages, and unwanted physical contact.

National and international research tells us many young people are experiencing sexual harassment on a pretty regular basis, whether as the subject, the witness or the perpetrator, and this can have lasting, sometimes lifelong, consequences.

A 2021 Irish research study found most sexual harassment of teens is perpetrated by other teens, predominantly boys; and it largely targets girls, LGB+ young people, and older teens. There were also incidents of girls bullying and sexually harassing other girls.¹³

Young people and people in general, are influenced by societal messages that surround them which normalise sexism and other discriminatory behaviours. These same messages, which deny the impact of such behaviours or blame the victims, may also result in victims not reporting incidents.



What you might do

Think about behaviours and messages within the family, local community and wider society about sexist or gender-based discrimination and prejudice, and how they might influence you and your child. Expand on the positive messages and challenge the negative, whatever the source. The rejection of discrimination, and of verbal and physical aggression, will help your child to develop the respectful attitudes, beliefs and behaviours necessary for healthy relationships in all aspects of their lives.

It will also help them to avoid engaging in sexual harassment, and to challenge this behaviour when they witness it in others.

Make sure your child knows that you take sexual harassment seriously and will listen and be supportive if they are ever victimised. Check with your child's school, youth service, and out-of-school clubs for information on their policies with regard to bullying and sexual harassment. See UK resource: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/talking-to-your-child-about-online-sexual-harassment-a-guide-for-parents/>.

13 Walsh, M. (2021) Storm and Stress: An Exploration of Sexual Harassment Amongst Adolescents 2021- Rape Crisis Network Ireland

Relationships within the family



Some things to know

As teenagers mature, they can be given more and more responsibility for themselves. They can also take on more responsibility for siblings and for household chores in general. These contributions to the running of the family will allow them to develop skills and exercise judgment, which will help them in future life.

At this stage of development it is still important for parents to set boundaries, including setting clear expectations for responsible behaviour. Expectations tend to be better met when they are explicit, practical, age-appropriate, and agreed upon by both the adults and adolescents involved. Both sides need to be flexible, and adults especially may want to stress what to do in a given situation, rather than solely focusing on what not to do or employing scare tactics.

It is important to remember that young people are taking steps toward independence, but they don't yet have the experience to help them fully assess and manage risks.

It can be useful to talk through potentially challenging situations in advance and help them to consider what they might do to keep themselves and others safe and well.

Most families go through their ups and downs as children move through adolescence to adulthood and the relationships change. The increasing pull towards friends and independence may cause more rifts than previously and it can be especially challenging when your child has strong opinions that are different to yours.

However, disagreements, and even conflict, are normal parts of most relationships and it is useful if your child can learn to manage these well, in the safe environment of the family.

It is important to remember that you are all on a learning journey and need to support each other in managing the changes. It is helpful as parents to role-model the positive behaviour you want to see in your teenager; they are more likely to adopt that behaviour when they experience it first-hand.

What you might do

- Although they may seem to have grown out of the need for displays of affection, find age-appropriate ways to continue to show your child they are safe, loved, respected and worthy of intimacy within their important relationships.
- Actively find opportunities for your teen to take responsibility for themselves and others, but be ready to offer support and guidance if needed.
- Set reasonable, clear expectations of your teen, but be open to hearing and considering their perspective.
- Help them to develop their communication and negotiation skills by:
 - Being patient when they use newly acquired reasoning skills; encourage healthy and respectful questioning and debate.
 - Not dismissing what may seem like illogical adolescent reasoning; acknowledge what your teen is saying and see if they can help you understand how they came to those conclusions.
 - Trying not to take it to heart when your child challenges or criticises your opinions and behaviours. They may challenge you, but they still need you.
 - Not worrying or reacting too strongly if they are 'over the top' at times.
 - Apologising when you get things wrong. This shows respect for your teen and that mistakes are normal. The important thing is to acknowledge when you get something wrong.



Friendships



Some things to know

Young people learn social skills by involvement in friendship and peer groups, including the importance of trust, loyalty and boundaries. These relationships can have an overall positive or negative influence on a young person's development, depending on the individuals and the group culture involved. For better or worse, they can help shape identity, personality, interests and abilities, and can be a substantial source of emotional support or emotional distress – and sometimes both.

Adolescence can be a bit of a rollercoaster when it comes to peer relationships and fall-outs or break-ups can hurt deeply. It can be very tempting to want to fix things for your child but it's more useful to help them work through issues themselves, offering advice and comfort when needed.

As your child develops they may leave behind old friendship groups and may easily fall into new ones, or may need a bit of support. Encouraging them to join a few different clubs may be a useful way of linking with others who share their interests.

While spending time with older teens may be a positive experience for your child, it is important to bear in mind that they may also be at a different stage of development and what's ok for them may not be ok for your younger teen. People may also assume your child is older than they are, based on their friendship group, and may treat them inappropriately. On balance, it is better for young people to have similar-age friends.

Hanging out in mixed-gender friendship groups can provide young people with the opportunity to learn about and be at ease with each other. However, this depends on there being a healthy group culture. It's important to talk to your teenager about socialising in a way that protects their safety and that of their friends.

It is also helpful to know the parents of your teen's friends and, between you, to ensure teens are not left without adult supervision for prolonged periods of time. Having ground rules about who can be in your house when you are not there is also useful.



As your child develops they may leave behind old friendship groups and may easily fall into new ones, or may need a bit of support. Encouraging them to join a few different clubs may be a useful way of linking with others who share their interests.



What you might do

Build ongoing conversations about what healthy relationships look and feel like into everyday life. Help your teenager to develop the skills to build healthy social connections.

- Encourage them to get involved in things they care about, so they make friends over shared interests. If possible, it is good to have more than one friendship group.
- Encourage them to get involved in their community as this can strengthen friendships, promote understanding across generations and provide opportunities to contribute to others.
- Explore the meaning of true friendship while acknowledging that all friendships, like all relationships, have their ups and downs. By and large, good friends listen to and support each other, don't put each other down and don't intentionally hurt each other. Good friends are loyal, trustworthy, respectful and dependable.
- Talk about healthy boundaries. Being a friend doesn't mean being available 24/7. All relationships need boundaries, respecting privacy and time apart. This makes friendships healthier and stronger in the long run.
- If possible, let them see you being a good supportive friend, and having good supportive friends.
- Role model healthy conflict and conflict resolution. If friends can work through their disagreements respectfully, it's likely to make for a stronger relationship.
- Help them to understand the difference between being dishonest and being tactful. If something difficult has to be said, it should be in as kind a way as possible.
- Even if they no longer wish to be friends with someone, encourage them to make the break in as kind a way as possible.
- Be on hand to offer comfort and support when friendships go wrong.

Dating relationships



Some things to know

Many teenagers become interested in dating at some point during mid-to late-adolescence, although not all.

It can be a good idea for parents to encourage younger adolescents to delay dating as it may be a distraction from school work, friends and other interests. It may also lead to sexual activity before they are ready to manage the possible physical, emotional and, indeed legal, consequences.

It's good for parents to create an environment where young people feel able to talk about their feelings and dating relationships. Part of this may mean making it clear you will be accepting and supportive of dating choices that reflect a different sexual orientation to your own.



What you might do

Consider at what age you might feel comfortable letting your teenager date and talk to them about the plusses and minuses of early teenage relationships. If they do start to date, try to get to know the other person and encourage them both to take their time and to limit the number of meetings during the week so they don't lose contact with friends and other activities. Unless you feel they are at risk, try not to be too judgemental about their choice of partner.

It may be helpful to have clear rules about curfews and whether they can be alone together in the house and in their bedroom. These should be negotiated with your teenager so they are perceived as fair.

Whenever, and whoever, your teen may start dating, it's good to be ready for the possible range of extreme emotions that might follow, and to be on hand to hear about the highs and lows, and, as necessary, to offer support, guidance and comfort.

Teenage break-ups



Some things to know

Teenagers experiencing a break-up may feel deep emotional pain. The first time they experience rejection can be overwhelming and the young person may need a lot of support. Even if they are the one who has done the breaking up, it can be a difficult time for your teen as they may have mixed emotions about their decision. There may also be complications around shared friends and social situations.



What you might do

If your child is the one wanting to break up with someone, help them figure out how they might do it as decently, and as safely, as possible for all concerned. Keep an eye out for emotional distress afterwards.

If your child has been broken up with and is distressed, be a listening board and give them space to grieve over the loss of the relationship. It's generally good to avoid criticising the other person.

In both cases, if your child is upset for a prolonged period, gently and sensitively encourage them to connect with friends and get involved in activities. This will help to give them a break from the emotional trauma they are experiencing. Reassure them that this is a coping mechanism and doesn't trivialise whatever they are feeling. If at all possible, suggest that they don't follow their ex's activities on social media as it can prolong the hurt. However, this may be difficult to do if they belong to the same friendship groups.

Sexual Activity

Sexual activity with self



Some things to know

Masturbation is another word for sexual self-stimulation. It involves touching, stroking, or massaging the genitals for sexual pleasure. Masturbation is very normal sexual behaviour. It often becomes more frequent during adolescence, although not all teens masturbate. There are no health risks to most masturbation practices and there may be health benefits as young people, of all genders, get to know their body and what gives them pleasure. For many people, masturbation is a safe and enjoyable part of their sexual activity throughout life.



What you might do

Reassure your teenager that masturbation is a normal part of sexual development. Ensure they understand this is a private activity and good hygiene should be practiced. See also the previous booklet in this series, 'Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: 8–12-year-olds'.

Sexual activity with others



Some things to know

Consensual, mutually pleasurable, sexual activity in adult relationships can have positive physical and emotional impacts on the people involved. In Ireland, most young people are not sexually active in their early to mid-teens, but many will have sex in their late teens/early twenties. It is very important that young people learn about sexuality and safer sex behaviours before they become sexually active, in order to make healthy choices for their benefit and that of any future sexual partners.

Although it can be hard to think about your child (even as a young adult) becoming sexually active, you are well placed to prepare them to make that decision at a time and in a way that's right for them. It's important for you to remember that you are not starting from scratch and that this should be an extension of all the conversations and experiences they've had since childhood about healthy, respectful relationships.

The law on young people's sexual activity



The [law](#) states that young people under 17 are not yet mature enough to make a free and informed decision to be sexually active, and it can prosecute anyone who has sex (oral, anal or vaginal) with someone under this age.

If the other person in the relationship has been, or is still, in a position of authority (teacher, employer, sports coach, clergy, etc.) then a young person must be 18 or over before they can give legal sexual consent.

It is illegal for anyone to send a sexual image of someone, or to someone, without their consent (whatever their age). It is an additional crime if the person in the image is under 18 (even if that person is the one sending the image), and to send a sexual image to someone who is under 17.

Views on young people's sexual activity



Apart from the law in relation to age, there are a wide range of views as to if, when, and how, young people should engage in sexual activity.

Research tells us there are good physical and emotional health reasons to delay early sexual activity. These include less regret about the timing of first sexual experience, fewer sexual partners, fewer STI infections.¹⁴ Adults may not always get it right either, but they are better placed to make decisions about who they want to be in a sexual relationship with, and what they want to do.

In addition to the legal and health issues, individuals have their own perspectives, often based on cultural, social and religious beliefs, as to when, where and with whom sexual activity is and isn't ok. Tensions can arise when the beliefs of parents and young people differ, and these can test a parent-child relationship. The important thing is to keep the lines of communication open, and to provide young adults with information, guidance and a loving home environment, all of which will help them make good choices.

¹⁴ Layte, Richard, et al. The Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships. Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency; Department of Health and Children, 2006.



What you might do

- Consider your attitudes and values about relationships and sexual activity and set clear behaviour expectations for your teen in line with these, negotiating changes as your child matures.
- Talk about your beliefs and values with your teen as a support to the ongoing development of their own value system.
- Challenge gender stereotypes about sexual feelings and sexual activity (see Sexual Consent).
- Create an environment where your child knows you will be accepting and supportive if their sexual orientation is different to your own.
- Discuss the benefits of delaying sexual activity until your teen is in a position to know more about what they want, who they want it with, and how they can best take care of themselves and their partner.
- Building on all the learning your child has had over the years about the nature of healthy relationships, talk to your teenager about issues of consent, pleasure, intimacy and safer sex within a sexual relationship.
- Emphasise that no one has the right to pressurise anyone else into sexual activity, but they do have the right to respectfully ask for what they want, as long as they can respectfully accept the answer.
- Support your teenager in developing good decision-making skills in relation to sexual activity. As necessary, support them to access contraceptive and safer sex advice and services.
- Consider how you feel about your teenager having a partner stay overnight in the family home and set whatever boundaries you decide work best for you and your family. If necessary, develop a set of ground rules around who can be in your home and in what circumstances, so everyone knows where they stand.
- If your child is preparing to live or travel independently of the family, whether for college, work or holiday, help them to think through any health and safety issues. This should include where they might go for information and support if needed. Young people going to college can be directed to the college's pastoral and medical services and to the Students' Union services (details will be on each college's website).

Conversations about readiness to engage in sexual activity

Long before your child is at the point of becoming sexually active or even in a relationship, you can gradually introduce conversations about things to consider before making that decision. The lists below will give you some idea of what you might discuss.



Signs that a person may be ready to engage in sexual activity

- They are capable of understanding and managing the possible consequences of sexual activity and are legally able to [consent](#).
- They understand the importance of consent beyond just the legal implications; there is mutual trust, and they and their partner respect each other's decisions when it comes to sexual boundaries.
- They can talk about feelings, sexual wants and boundaries.
- They can talk about, and take steps to protect themselves and their partner against, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancy.

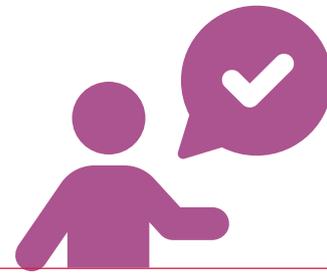


Signs that a person may not be ready to engage in sexual activity

- They are overly influenced by what they know, or imagine, other people are doing sexually.
- They or their partner is jealous and possessive of the other.
- They or their partner puts pressure on the other and refuses to see a different point of view.
- They or their partner manipulates or pressurises the other to have sex, or particular forms of sex. This can be overt bullying, including threatening to end the relationship, or it can be a more subtle wearing down of a person's confidence and ability to exercise their rights.



Sexual consent



Some things to know

Consent is when one person gives permission to another to do something.

In Ireland the legal age of sexual consent is 17 years old. In Irish law, a person consents to a sexual act if they are capable of understanding what's involved and the possible consequences, and freely and voluntarily agree to engage in that act. A person cannot be said to have consented if they are under force or threat, if they are asleep or unconscious, if they are incapable of consenting because of the effect of alcohol or some other drug, if they suffer from a physical disability that prevents them communicating their consent, if they are mistaken as to the nature and purpose of the act, or if their identity is mistaken. Consent cannot be assumed because people have had sex before, and it can be withdrawn at any time.

There are additional safeguards in relation to people with an intellectual disability or mental impairment that might affect their ability to give informed consent. See <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/sexual-health/sexual-consent/>

Even when sexual activity might be deemed to be legally consensual, societal beliefs and stereotypes about sexual feelings and behaviour can get in the way of giving and getting true consent. This is particularly the case when it comes to the strong messages in our society about gender and sex.

A woman's ability to freely consent to sex might be affected by societal messages about the importance of being 'nice'. They may find it difficult to assert their wants and needs if they have been led to believe that women don't feel desire or that women 'owe' sex to their male partners. A man's ability to consent might be affected by the message that men are always 'up for it', or that their masculinity is defined by number of sexual partners.

They may also be less able to accept a refusal because of societal messages about men's need for sex and women's obligation to provide it. Because of this, your conversations with your teen about consent should discuss gender stereotypes about sexual feelings and behaviours and how they might limit people's decisions and their ability to be assertive.

There can also be some concern that communication around consent will get in the way of sex, so young people should know that it doesn't need to sound like a contract negotiation but can be woven into the sexual activity, making the experience more enjoyable for all.

So, while it is important to know the legal situation with regard to consent, focussing on this alone has limited value because it doesn't address the complexity and challenges of sexual consent in real life and can alienate young people, particularly young men. To tease out the confusion and dilemmas associated with sexual consent, young people need safe spaces at home, in school and in youth work and other community settings to hear from each other and from trusted adults. This will help them develop the knowledge, beliefs and skills to enable them to engage in consensual, respectful and mutually pleasurable sexual activity, when it is right for them and for their partner.



What you might do

Talk to your teenager about the importance of respect, care and kindness in all human relationships, including sexual relationships. This holds true whether the relationship is long- or short-term. Emphasise that their body is their own. They don't have to let anyone touch it in a way that feels unsafe or unwanted for them, and should not touch others in a way they don't want, like, or agree to. This applies to a hug, a kiss or something more intimate. Foster your child's ability to be assertive, this will help them to be clearer about their wants and needs in all aspects of life, and to be more able to communicate these to others.

As your child matures, extend the conversations to talk about [sexual relationships](#) – talking about the importance of respect for themselves and the other person; the importance of mutual pleasure; and their beliefs about gender and sexual activity, and how gender stereotypes might interfere with making decisions that are right for them and their partner.

See 'Stepping Stones to Consent' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFdmAquVPNk>



Safer sex



Some things to know

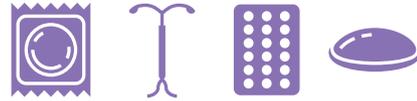
All sexual activity involving close bodily contact carries some health risk. Good safer sex education will not be based on assumptions about sexual activity linked to a person's sexual orientation, but instead, will focus on types of sexual activity and the associated risks.¹⁵ It is very important for young people to weigh up the risks of different sexual activities and, as appropriate, take sensible precautions against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies.

There are many things people can do to make their sexual activity safer. These include:

- Choosing lower-risk sexual activities.
- Choosing precautions that match the risk of the activity.
- Using condoms properly during sexual activity to reduce the risk of STIs.
- Using hormonal contraception in addition to condoms, if there is a risk of pregnancy.
- Having regular tests for STIs if sexually active, and particularly before a new partner.
- Completing any prescribed treatment for an STI and avoiding sexual contact until no longer infectious.
- Checking out if eligible for PrEP (a medication that protects against HIV infection and is available, free of charge, to people at high risk of infection).
- Limiting the number of sexual partners.
- Being sober when making decisions about sexual activity.
- Practising active consent: communicating with partners about what they both want, and don't want, sexually; and respecting their partner's sexual boundaries.

¹⁵ This is because people may engage in sexual activity that doesn't reflect their sexual orientation. However, many young LGB+ people feel mainstream sex education is, by default, heterosexual-focussed, so all aspects of relationships and sexuality education should acknowledge and be inclusive of diverse sexual orientations and genders.

Contraception



There is a range of contraceptive options. These largely divide into hormonal and non-hormonal, and long-term and short-term categories. It can take people a while to find the contraception method that best suits them, and contraception needs can change over time.

Condoms are the only devices that offer protection against both an unintended pregnancy and STIs, but should be used with another type of contraception to increase protection against pregnancy. In the event of unprotected sex or contraception failure, Emergency Contraception (EC) can be used up to 5 days after (depending on type).

The most common reasons people don't use contraception during sex is because they weren't planning to have sex and are unprepared, or they felt it wasn't their role, as a woman, to carry a condom. Some young people who are LGB+ may think contraception is not relevant for them, but as sexual activity is not always in line with orientation, it's important to base precautions on the activity.

What you might do

Check what your teen knows about contraception and challenge any gender stereotypes that suggest girls shouldn't buy and carry condoms. If appropriate, encourage your child to talk to a GP about their contraceptive choices. They may need to try out several options to find what works best for them. For more information on contraception choices, including Emergency Contraception, see: <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/sexual-health/contraception/your-choices/>

Sexually transmitted infections



Some things to know

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are the possible, logical consequence of being in close bodily contact with another person. STIs are generally viral or bacterial infections, which are passed on in blood, semen, vaginal fluids, and from skin to skin, during sexual contact. Different sexual activities have different levels of risk.

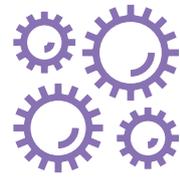
Anyone who is sexually active can be infected with one or more STIs, even the first time they have sex. Obviously the more sexual partners a person has, particularly if they are not taking sufficient precautions, the more at risk they will be.

The most common STIs in Ireland are chlamydia and genital warts. Some STIs have no obvious symptoms, others may lie dormant for many weeks or months before becoming apparent, and some have symptoms that go away but the infection can still be active in the body.

If not detected and treated, STIs can be passed on to others and do lasting damage to a person's overall health.

The only way a person knows for sure that they have an STI is if they are tested. In addition to testing in a GP surgery or STI clinic, home testing is becoming increasingly available. The good news is that most STIs, if diagnosed in time, can be cured and all can be treated to reduce their impact.

A sense of shame or embarrassment can stop young (and not so young) people from getting tested and treated if they have been exposed to the risk of getting an STI. This means it is important to take the stigma out of conversations about STIs, and to promote STI testing as the smart thing to do if you are sexually active.



What you might do

Long before they are at the point of considering a sexual relationship, and as part of your ongoing chats about relationships and sexuality, talk with your child about the existence of STIs. Take the stigma and mystery out of STIs by making sure your child knows they are largely bacterial and viral infections that are passed on, and treated, in similar ways to all other such infections.

Make sure they know: the importance of safer sex practices for reducing the risk of getting or passing on infections, and that there are free, non-judgemental STI testing and treatment services available if they need them. Read up on STIs and STI services on [sexualwellbeing.ie](https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie).

Unplanned teenage pregnancy



Some things to know

Teenage pregnancy has decreased hugely in Ireland over the years. Currently the small number of births to teenage parents, is mainly to those in their late teens.¹⁶ That said, unplanned teenage pregnancies still happen and can be a source of great worry and distress for the young people involved and their families. The HSE funds free, trustworthy, unbiased and non-judgemental information and counselling services. These can provide information and support on all the available options, including continued pregnancy supports and abortion services. They also offer an aftercare service following an abortion procedure.



What you might do

If your child experiences an unplanned pregnancy, contact the HSE-funded, free, unbiased and non-judgemental counselling services. These will support your child to explore their options and to proceed in whatever way they choose. Check out [myoptions.ie](https://www.myoptions.ie) or Freephone 1800 828 010.

¹⁶ HSE Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme. (2022) Information Summary about Teenage Pregnancy in Ireland 2000 – 2020. Dublin: HSE Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme.

Risk-taking, alcohol, drugs and sex



Some things to know

Risk-taking behaviours are a normal part of adolescence, influenced by a complex mix of genes, hormones, brain development and environment. The ability to take healthy risks supports the young person's move towards independence, allowing them to get a job, go to college, leave home, etc. Some risk-taking behaviours may be less healthy, such as those associated with sexual activity while under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs.

Adolescent brain development means drugs and alcohol have a bigger effect than on the adult brain, and those who start drinking before 15 years of age, are four times more likely to develop alcohol or drug dependence as adults. How parents talk about alcohol and drugs, and how they themselves consume alcohol, can influence the attitudes and behaviour of their children.

Using alcohol and drugs affects judgement and decision-making at any age, and even more so in the teenage years. This can result in significant harm to young people as a result of accidents, fights, drug debts, poisoning and overdose.

Drinking and drug use may also impact on sexual behaviour in a number of ways, including regretting sexual activity, poor sexual experiences, more risk-taking and difficulty sticking with decisions about boundaries, having sex without using a condom, and being less able to recognise or manage risky situations and so being more vulnerable.

This does not mean that someone who is drunk or high is responsible for the aggressive or criminal behaviour of others against them. It is a sexual offense to have sex with a person who is so affected by alcohol or drugs that they can't give fully informed consent; anyone who does this can't use being intoxicated themselves as a moral or legal excuse.



What you might do

Help your adolescent to develop their capacity to assess risk and make decisions; giving them choices and freedom wherever you can. But don't turn a blind eye or hesitate to act where safety is concerned.

Talk and listen to your teenager regularly about alcohol and drug use, including the possible association with unplanned sexual activity and sexual violence. Discuss options to minimise or avoid risks such as: choosing to avoid drinking altogether; delaying the decision to drink until they are older (ideally 18+); not drinking to get drunk; completely avoiding illegal drugs; only taking medications as prescribed; staying close to friends, and looking after friends, in social situations.

It's difficult to manage tricky situations in the moment, so help your child plan some coping strategies in advance. They could have some excuses ready such as "I can't go home drunk, my parents would kill me." "I have to get up early for training." "Nah I prefer to stay sober." You could agree a word that your child can send when they need help exiting a situation where they feel unsafe or uncomfortable. This might prompt you to call or message them to come home, or to collect them. Equally, when they are out socialising, encourage them to inform a responsible adult if they are concerned about somebody's condition (e.g. passing out, very drowsy, fighting with others).

For more information see: https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/29435/1/Alcohol_and_drugs_a_parents_guide.pdf

Relationships and sexual activity in the online world



Some things to know

For many people of all ages, their online and offline worlds are equally important. Interest groups, friendships and more intimate relationships may exist in one or the other, but more often they span both. This is particularly so for most teenagers and young adults. So while parents may wish to use digital parental controls, it is also essential that they help their teenagers develop the digital literacy skills that will help them get the most of out all the Internet has to offer, while maintaining their own and others' safety. It's important to consider any gender bias in preparing your child for the online world. Parents may put overly restrictive rules and protections in place for girls, while putting too few protections in place for boys. This can leave boys potentially more vulnerable to harm, and may also allow some boys to behave badly online without sanction.

All teens, whatever their gender, need to develop the digital skills that will enable them to keep better control of their accounts, to set appropriate privacy and security settings, to deal with other online users respectfully, and to critically assess what they are seeing and hearing and how it fits with their own attitudes, values and behaviours. Young people should also bear in mind that future partners and employers may access their online profile or digital footprint.

Parents can feel overwhelmed by the pace of change when it comes to popular digital platforms and apps, but it is important to have a level of knowledge about current trends and the potential benefits and risks of each.

What you might do

Consider carefully your child's age and their stage of maturity in advance of giving them a smart phone. Think about using parental control programmes on your child's digital devices to put in place a level of security, but don't totally depend on this to keep your child safe. For their short and long term wellbeing, teach your child to be a 'smart digital citizen'.

Agree reasonable ground rules on Internet use, but be open to negotiating these as your child matures and situations arise.

Try to be honest about what level of monitoring you do, rather than 'spy' on your teen.

Although it can seem a bit baffling to many parents, it's important that you have some familiarity with the technology and the apps that are popular with young people. See Webwise.ie for up-to-date information and advice for young people, parents and teachers.



Meeting people online



Some things to know

A lot of social activity happens online – in chatrooms, on gaming platforms, etc. This can be a great way for people to connect with others who have similar interests anywhere in the world. However, there is a need to be savvy to avoid the pitfalls. Being safe and having fun online requires teens to be in control of their accounts, of how people can find them, and of the things they publish or share online. They need to have a healthy caution about their online friends and acquaintances, and put in place safeguards if they ever get to the stage of meeting in the flesh. These apply whether it's as a friend or a date.

Dating online can mean a lot of things. It can involve messaging between people who know each other in the real world, or it can involve people meeting online on a dating, gaming or social networking platform. The relationship might stay online or extend to face-to-face meetings. The digital age of consent in Ireland is 16, but many of the most popular dating apps have set an 18+ age limit.

Using dating apps or social networking apps that depend on location data is not recommended for young people.



What you might do

Help your teen to consider their digital security and privacy settings, and remind them to review these regularly. Urge caution when they are considering who to add as friends or followers, especially when the requests are from strangers. To minimise the information publicly available, they could think about using an avatar rather than a photo for their public profile, turn off GPS/ location-sharing settings and cover their camera lens when they are not using it. Encourage them to think twice before they post or share online, and consider how what they post or share might harm themselves and/ or hurt someone else's feelings or reputation. See webwise.ie for further information for you and your child.



Sexting



Some things to know

Sexting can refer to text messages, but more often it means sharing sexual images online. Sexting between adults is a legal and increasingly common, if potentially risky, practice.

When it comes to young people the law is different. It is illegal for someone to send a sexual image of someone under 18, even if it's of themselves, as it's considered child pornography. It is also illegal to send a sexual image to someone under 17 as it is considered to be exposing them to pornography.

Whatever a person's age, it is completely illegal to post or share intimate or sexual images of them, or to them, without their consent. It is additionally criminal if they are under-age.

There is a growing incidence of sexting among young people, but probably less than they generally believe. Many young people overestimate the rate of under-age sexting by others and this can make it seem more 'normal' and acceptable and add to the pressure to engage. Other reasons young people sext include to show love and trust within a relationship; feeling pressured to do it by a current or prospective partner; and for status among peers.

While intimate images of all genders are posted and shared beyond the intended recipient, girls experience more social stigma and blame if their image is released. It is important young people understand that while someone who shares a sexual image of themselves may have acted unwisely, it is the people who maliciously or carelessly pass on the image, or engage in shaming the people featured, that cause the most harm.



What you might do

Talk to your child about the potential risks associated with posting sexual or intimate images of themselves online and what they might do to avoid them. Help them to consider practical ways they might push back against any pressure to post or share intimate images. Try not to scaremonger as this might prevent them from seeking help if they need it. Instead, reassure them that if they ever find themselves in a difficult situation with regard to online sharing of sexual images, there is always something that can be done and you will be there to help them work through it.

Remind your teenager that if they receive sexual images they must not pass them on, even if their friends do. Remind them of the law, but also of the need to act with kindness and decency when people's rights and well-being are at stake.



Talking about sexualised and discriminatory media content, and pornography



Some things to know

Many parents are understandably overwhelmed at the thought that their teen might be accessing pornography, and that they may have to talk with them about it. However, some of the most widespread negative influences on a young person's perception of themselves, and of relationships in general, may be found in the everyday discriminatory and negative media coverage of things like bodies, gender/ gender roles, sexual orientation, disability, relationships, and sexual activity. This means that long before parents talk to their children about pornography they can be discussing these everyday issues to help their child develop media literacy, and to develop an attitude of respect, care and compassion, both in relation to themselves and other people. This is important in itself and will act as a foundation on which conversations about pornography can take place.

Pornography generally refers to sexually explicit images of sex organs or sexual activity that people use to get sexually excited. Teenagers are wired to be curious, and their curiosity may lead them to search online for information about sex. This may result in deliberately or accidentally accessing pornography. Links that pop up on social media and gaming sites may make this more likely, making accessing quite extreme images just a few clicks away.

People have different personal views about whether making and viewing pornography is ethically ok. However, many types of pornography are legal for adult consumption. This is not the case for teenagers who are at a different stage of brain development and have limited life experience against which to judge pornographic activity.

That said, the evidence tells us that a significant number of young people in Ireland and internationally are exposed to pornography in childhood and adolescence. Research reports that boys often see more violent pornography at an earlier age, whereas girls are often exposed to pornography without looking for it.¹⁷

Most pornography is targeted at men, bears little resemblance to the majority of real life sexual experiences, and often includes violent and degrading behaviours. It generally objectifies groups of people – particularly women, people of colour, disabled people and LGBT+ people. There is evidence that exposure to pornography affects young people's attitudes and beliefs regarding sex and may create unrealistic expectations. This applies to all genders. Young men may feel they are required to be dominant, even aggressive, in sexual situations, without regard for their partner's feeling or enjoyment. The people who are objectified in pornography may absorb the negative messaging and be more inclined to accept exploitation and predatory behaviours as normal.

Excessive consumption of pornography at any age, but especially in adolescence, may lead to sexual function problems for in-person sexual relationships. One of the possible reasons is the unnatural level of stimulation the brain can receive from rapid clicking between pornographic scenes.

This level is unlikely to be replicated in sexual activity with a partner, and the difference can lead to negative physical and psychological impacts on individuals and relationships.

¹⁷ United Nations Children's Fund. The Opportunity for Digital Sexuality Education in East Asia and the Pacific. UNICEF East Asia and Pacific, Bangkok, 2019.

Parents have a responsibility to take reasonable steps to protect their children and adolescents from exposure to pornography in their formative years. However, this is not enough in itself.

It is highly likely that despite parental care, many young people will be exposed to pornography first hand. In any case, they live in a culture affected by pornography and the sexualisation of all types of media.

That being the case, the best protection is for young people is to have a level of digital literacy and the ability to be independent and critical thinkers who can assess media content and how it fits with their own life and values.

N.B. Talking to and educating children about pornography in the home, school and community settings should never include exposing them to it.



What you might do

Long before you ever discuss pornography, you can be chatting about examples of content in everyday media (social media, gaming, music, etc.) that sexualise and objectify groups of people. For instance, you can:

- Challenge material that suggests possessive relationships, bullying, racism, homophobia and transphobia are normal and acceptable behaviours.
- Encourage critical thinking about how women, men, relationships and sex are portrayed in online and offline media.
- Explore if, and how, LGBT+, people of colour, people with a disability etc. are portrayed sexually in the media.
- Discuss the pressure on young people, especially girls, to be 'photo-ready' at all times and to constantly post on their social media pages.
- Explore how media images do not reflect the average person, and that a lot of time, effort and technology goes into creating celebrity online images.
- Help them to consider the messages behind media material and the motivation of the creators – much of which is about creating profit out of the dissatisfaction or aspirations they create.

It's very important that you don't ignore the probability that your teen has been, or will be, exposed to pornography. Consider your own feelings about the consumption of pornography and decide what messages you want to share with your teenager.

Try to avoid lecturing, but rather see talking about pornography as a part of your overall ongoing conversations about how people relate to each other and what makes for real-life healthy relationships, and healthy sexual relationships. On a gradual basis you can:

- Chat with your teen about the sexualised images around them and the messages they're getting about relationships from a range of different media and activities. Check out what they think of them and the possible impact on people's body image, their gender roles and expectations, and their behaviours.
- Signpost your teen to trustworthy sources of information about relationships. This may not stop them accessing pornography but may reduce the chances of it happening while searching online for information. It will also give them an additional perspective on relationships and sex, against which they can assess pornographic content.
- Emphasise that pornography does not reflect real-life sexual relationships and that many of the activities are not actually pleasurable for those involved, no matter how it might appear. The activities are a performance, they are chosen on the basis of what sells, and what will look good on camera.
- Emphasise that real-life sexual experiences should be consensual, mutually enjoyable and use safer sex practices including consistent condom use.

Young people with an intellectual and/or physical disability



Some things to know

All young people, including those with intellectual or physical disabilities, have needs and wants associated with their physical sexual development, and with the healthy development and expression of their sexuality. They need information and support to keep them healthy and safe, to negotiate relationships and to enable them to live their full lives.

Learning about the body, relationships and sexuality with the help of trustworthy adults is protective and supportive of all young people, but especially for young people with a disability. They may not see people with disabilities represented in media and popular culture as wanting, and being capable of having consensual, romantic and sexually intimate relationships. They may feel isolated and different from their same-age peers, and may be additionally vulnerable to abuse.



What you might do

- Consider how you feel about your child becoming an adolescent and a young adult, and all that this involves. What supports might they, and you, need to negotiate the changes?
- Talk to your child's school and other support services about how you can work together to help your child manage the physical, social and emotional changes associated with puberty and adolescence.
- Read up on the topic of relationships and sexuality development in general and specific to your child's needs. Depending on their disability, much of the content of this book may be relevant for your child but they may also have specific or additional requirements.
- Talk about all aspects of relationships and sexuality on an ongoing basis. These needn't be 'big talks' but chats that take advantage of cues in everyday life.

If your child has an intellectual disability, they may need to go at a slower pace, and need to revisit topics more often.

- Take account of your child's disability in your conversations about relationships and sexuality. For some young people this may include talking about acceptable public and private behaviours; emphasising respect for their own and other people's physical boundaries; using images, story boards and anatomically correct figures to make the information more concrete; working through relationship scenarios and possible responses; and negotiating physical practicalities of hygiene, sexual activity and access to services, etc.

See the 'Where to get more help and information' section at the end of this resource for some helpful organisations and resources.

And finally!

Looking after yourself while parenting a teen

The journey of supporting your teenager towards independence can have its ups and downs. It will be good for both you and your teen if you can give yourself the time and attention needed to maintain your own well-being.

- Be compassionate with yourself and your child. There is a lot going on in the years between 13 and 18, not least the way the relationship between you is changing as they become a young adult. You will both grow from talking, listening and learning together.
- If you are co-parenting, talk to each other about your approach to the topics outlined in the booklet, about the boundaries you will jointly set for your teenager and the support you will offer.
- Know your own boundaries about what you are, and are not, willing to share about your teenage years and your relationships.
- Support yourself by talking to other parents about your various approaches to the issue of relationships and sexuality education and to supporting your teenage children.
- Maintain your own relationships and interests to support your well-being and mental health

Where to get more help and information

Some of the sources of support listed below are for parents of children of all ages and some are specifically about or for teenagers. It is recommended that parents review websites and resources to ensure that they are relevant and suitable for their child.

Some resources from other countries have been included because of their potential value but parents must bear in mind that references to the law and to school systems, services and supports will not be applicable to Ireland

General parenting supports

<https://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/parenting-information/parenting-information-fsa/> Listing a range of services and sources of information and support for parents

For young people

www.childline.ie – a website offering information and guidance to young people on a wide range of issues see <https://www.childline.ie/info-advice/>

www.spunout.ie – information on a broad range of topics of relevance to 16-25 year olds, including relationships and sexuality

HSE resources for parents and young people

www.mychild.ie – website for parents of children 0-5 addressing a broad range of topics

www.sexualwellbeing.ie – information on sexual health for adults

www.sexualwellbeing.ie/parents – sexual health information and resources for parents

www.healthpromotion.ie – to order or download a range of health resources including on relationships and sexual health including:

[Busy Bodies](#) – booklet for children on the basics of puberty and adolescence

[Making the ‘Big Talk’ many small talks: 4-7 year olds- booklet for parents of young children](#)

[Making the ‘Big Talk’ many small talks: 8-12 year olds- booklet for parents on puberty and early adolescence](#)

[Making the ‘Big Talk’ many small talks: 13-18 year olds- booklet for parents of adolescents and young adults](#)

[Making the ‘Big Talk’ many small talks: Healthy Ireland Library Collection](#) – brochure listing lots of useful books on relationship and sexuality topics available in your local library through the ‘HI (Healthy Ireland) at Your Library’ project

*From 2022, there will be HSE, online, relationships and sexual health information for young people of 14-16 years of age. Check sexualwellbeing.ie for updates.

Information on Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools and supports for parents

<https://curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Short-Courses/SPHE/>

<https://ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/curriculum-developments/social-personal-and-health-education-relationships-and-sexuality-education/>

[https://curriculumonline.ie/Senior-cycle/SPHE-\(1\)/](https://curriculumonline.ie/Senior-cycle/SPHE-(1)/)

www.pdst.ie/post-primary/health-wellbeing/sphe – Department of Education and Skills, RSE Curriculum and Support Materials for teachers and parents of post primary school children

www.npc.ie – National Parents’ Council Primary(NPC) is the voice of, and advocate for, all parents and guardians of young people in primary education

www.npcpp.ie – National Parents’ Council Post Primary (NPCPP) is the voice of, and advocate for, all parents and guardians of young people in post-primary education

Information on internet safety

www.webwise.ie/parents – advice and information for parents to help them promote online safety to their children including the booklet Parents’ Guide to a better internet . Webwise is co-funded by the Department of Education and Skills and the EU Safer Internet Programme

Information on bullying

www.tacklebullying.ie – information and advice to counter bullying and cyberbullying for young people, parents and teachers from the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre at DCU. Supported by the Department for Education and Skills

For parents of LGBT+ young people

www.belongto.org – BeLong To: the national organisation for LGB+ young people

www.belongto.org/parents/parent-support-groups/

For parents of young people with intellectual and/or physical disabilities

www.ifpa.ie/speakeasyplus – Irish Family Planning Association, Speakeasy Plus Training Programme

www.middletownautism.com/training/parents – Autism and the Special School, Relationships and Sexuality Education (Parents)

www.teenage-resource.middletownautism.com/teenage-issues-and-strategies/relationships-and-sexuality/ – RSE resource for young people with autism

www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/import/growing-up-sex-and-relationships.pdf
– Growing up, sex and relationships: a useful booklet to support parents and families whose children have physical disabilities, including those who may also have mild to moderate learning disabilities

www.vkc.mc.vanderbilt.edu/HealthyBodies – resource booklets to help parents and carers support young people with autism to understand and manage puberty



Published by the Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme,
HSE Health and Wellbeing, Strategy and Research 2022

HSE Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme

4th Floor, 89-94 Capel Street, Dublin 1

Phone: 01 7959130

email: info@crisispregnancy.ie

This booklet and other resources for parents are available to download or
order from healthpromotion.ie

Further information and advice for parents on the topics of relationship and
sexuality health can be accessed at <https://sexualwellbeing.ie/parents>

