

## *WHEN IS THE RIGHT TIME TO TALK ABOUT SEX WITH MY CHILD?*

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The vast majority of people in contemporary North America experience sexual initiation sometime during adolescence (between 13 and 17 years old). Research reveals that early sexual activity can bring unpleasant and devastating consequences for teenagers. STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections) and unwanted pregnancies are only a small portion of the problem. An early and irresponsible sexual initiation can also cause severe damage to the mental health of teenagers. Their self-esteem can be affected and some emotional disorders, such as depression and panic attacks, may occur.

In a survey conducted at the University of North Carolina, more than a thousand participants aged between 12 and 14 years old were interviewed. The results showed that media content (movies, TV programs, music, newspapers, games, commercials, internet, etc.) has significant influence on teen sexual behaviour. Children who are exposed to sexual images in the media are more likely to engage in sexual behaviour at a younger age. At the same time, children who have had sex education at home are less likely to engage in risky sexual activity. According to the survey results, most parents don't feel comfortable talking about sex with their children. Jane Brown, PhD, who coordinated the survey, says the media is replacing parents' roles in sexual education and leading our children to have earlier sexual experiences.

As much as parents are trying to control and filter media exposure in their homes, it is almost impossible to avoid completely. Several studies published in the *Journal of Adolescent Research* warn that, in addition to media hazards, children's peer groups strongly influence their sexual behaviours. Studies suggest that the lack of communication at home can lead teenagers to be more influenced by their peer groups than by their parents. Consequently, these teenagers tend to have earlier sexual initiation than teenagers who talk about sex with their parents at home. As indicated by Jane Brown's research, the open dialog between parents and children is an important tool that must be used for children's sexual education.

Questions most often asked by parents are, "WHEN should I start talking about sex with my children?" and "Are they READY for this kind of discussion?" The answer is this: the sooner, the better. There is no right age, no perfect time and no

prepared script. Each child's individuality and developmental stage must be respected when talking about sex. However, the following tips can help parents during this educational process:

- For small children (3 to 6 years old), it is important to answer to all questions in a simple, clear and objective way. Parents don't need to go beyond their questions, with details in which they are not yet interested.

- School-aged children (over 6 years old) can already notice the differences between men and women, and they can ask more complex questions. These questions must be answered naturally and devoid of taboos, prejudices or discomforts. If children sense that their parents are uncomfortable talking about this subject, they will stop asking. This is when they will turn to other sources, such as media or their peers, for information.

- During the preteen years (starting at 11 years old), parents must be alert and focus mainly on communicating moral values and concepts. Respect for both genders and boundaries in relationships must be established. At this time, parents should explore the level of knowledge their children have about sex. More directed conversations and detailed explanations should take place, particularly about what their children are seeing in the media.

- In the adolescent years (13 years and over), discussions should be frequent, but without being aggressive, prejudiced or invasive. Teenagers need to have their space and time respected. The parent's role is to guide, give confidence, and help their children build positive self-esteem.

We are living in a sexually permissive society and our children are not free from the influences of media and their peers. More than ever, parents need to establish a relationship where children can feel safe and comfortable about any subject, including sex. Countless studies have shown that the influence parents have on their children's sexual behaviour depends significantly on the quality of the relationship between them. Strong family support and an open dialogue will help build a positive influence on teenagers' sexual attitudes and choices. Sexual education at home will help to prevent children from having risky behaviour, early sexual initiation, and suffering the unpleasant consequences.

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