

The Role of Providers in Parent-Child Communication

Providers play an important role in educating entire families on sexual health, sexual orientation and gender identity and facilitating communication between adolescent patients and their parents. Healthy communication about sex between parents and children is extremely important in ensuring that young people have the support and information they need to make healthy decisions about sex and sexuality. Although it may seem difficult to encourage communication while still respecting the teen's privacy, it is possible to maintain confidentiality and at the same time promote parent-child communication.

The Benefits of Parent-Child Communication

- ▶ Young people who feel connected to home and to their parent(s)/caregiver(s) delay initiation of sexual activity.¹
- ▶ Young people who have conversations with their parents about sex are also more likely to have conversations with their partners about sex.²
- ▶ Young people who regularly use contraception are more likely to report having had discussions about sex with their parents than sexually active young people who are not using contraception.³
- ▶ Young people whose parents talked to them about condoms are more likely to use a condom at first intercourse and more consistently thereafter.⁴
- ▶ Young people whose families and caregivers openly talk about their sexual orientation are at lower risk for health problems and risky sexual behavior.⁵

TIPS FOR ENCOURAGING PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION

With Youth:

- ⇒ Reiterate the importance of parent-child communication each time you talk with the teen.
- ⇒ Ask why they do not want to involve a parent and try and get a sense of what they are afraid of. You can't force a teenager to talk to their parents, but you can probe further when a young person says they don't want to or can't talk to their parent about sensitive issues.
- ⇒ Let LGBT teens know that families that reject their LGBT identity may be motivated by care and concern for their teen and can become more supportive when they learn how to provide support to their teen.⁵
- ⇒ Ask if they need help talking to their parent about a particular issue and offer to meet with the youth and their parent together.
- ⇒ If they feel uncomfortable talking to their parent, identify other caring adults in their immediate or extended family that they can talk to.
- ⇒ Offer examples of ways that talking to parents/caregivers can help to ensure that they get support. E.g., help getting to appointments or someone to talk to when confusing things happen with their peers.
- ⇒ Share examples of young people who were afraid to talk to their parent about a sensitive issue and how it went better than they expected.

With Parents:

- ⇒ Reiterate the importance of parent-child communication each time you talk with parents.
- ⇒ For parents of LGBT teens, tell them that family support decreases risk for HIV, STIs, suicide and promotes well-being while family rejection increases these risks.⁵
- ⇒ Teach them medically accurate information, so that they can reinforce this at home.
- ⇒ Ask if they need help talking to their children or if there are particular issues they find hard to discuss at home.
- ⇒ Remind parents that teens are often afraid of disappointing their parents.
- ⇒ Encourage taking advantage of teachable moments, such as when a young person asks a question or something is witnessed while watching TV together, for example, where a bigger discussion and line of communication can be opened up.
- ⇒ Help parents find ways to be involved while respecting a young person's privacy and confidentiality.
- ⇒ Encourage parents to initiate and sustain open dialogues about health and sexuality with their children. Help parents put themselves in the shoes of a young person, to understand how difficult it is for their child to open up about sexuality and health.
- ⇒ Offer educational materials and resources about parent-child communication. See pg. 66 and pg. 68.

Resources

- 🔗 Advocates for Youth - <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/>
- 🔗 Guttmacher Institute - <http://www.guttmacher.org/>

¹Resnick, MD et al. Protecting Adolescents from Harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *JAMA*. 1997; 278:823-32.

²Whitaker, DJ et al. Teenage Partners' Communication About Sexual Risk and Condom Use: The Importance of Parent-Teenager Discussions. *Family Planning Perspectives*. 1999; 31(3): 117-21.

³Hacker, KA et al. Listening to Youth: Teen Perspectives on Pregnancy Prevention. *J of Adol Health*. 2000; 26:279-88.

⁴Miller, KS et al. Patterns of Condom Use Among Adolescents: The Impact of Mother-Adolescent Communication. *Amer J of Public Health*. 1998; 88: 1542-44.

⁵Ryan C. Supportive families, healthy children: Helping families with lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender children. San Francisco, CA: Marian Wright Edelman Institute, San Francisco State University, 2009.