

Sexual Decision-Making

Healthcare providers play an important role in influencing the decisions that teens make surrounding sex. However, adolescents are equally as likely to get information on sexual decision-making from television than from providers (60% and 62% respectively).¹ By encouraging communication between teens and their parents and educating youth about the responsibilities, benefits, and risks involved with sexual activity, healthcare providers can facilitate healthy choices. Some of these choices may include initiating sexual activity at an appropriate time or using condoms consistently.

THEMES INFLUENCING ADOLESCENT SEXUAL- DECISION MAKING ²	PROVIDER INTERVENTION STRATEGIES
<p>1. Desire for Intimacy - Teens frequently report that desire for intimacy/love and sexual attraction significantly influence sexual decisions.</p> <p>2. Perceived Relationship Safety – Teens equate longer term relationships with trust and safety. This often results in the use of hormonal methods for pregnancy prevention and decreased or inconsistent condom use.</p> <p>3. Problem Solving and Cognitive Ability – Higher cognitive and reasoning ability may imply the ability to be more thoughtful and mature with decision-making. Lower problem-solving skills and cognitive ability is associated with earlier age of sexual debut. 50% of females with learning disabilities will be mothers within 3-5 years of leaving high school.³</p> <p>4. Family and Peer Influence – The decision to initiate sexual intercourse is often influenced by parents, peers and sexual partners. For example, teens who talk to their parents about sex are more likely to have conversations with their partners about sex.⁴</p> <p>5. Concern for Pregnancy or STI – Many teens underestimate their personal vulnerability for pregnancy and STIs.</p>	<p>1. Encourage thinking about sexual intimacy in the context of healthy relationships and suggest using experience of pleasure (or lack there of), level of partner communication, and the importance of safer sex as measures of sexual readiness.</p> <p>2. Raise the issue of consistent condom use if there is risk for STIs. Discuss approaches to STI risk reduction (condom use, condom use with side partners, limiting number of partners, etc.) as well as pregnancy risk reduction.</p> <p>3. Drugs and alcohol can impair decision-making skills. Encourage teens to: discuss sexual decisions with their partners before drinking; go to parties with a friend and designate one to stay sober for the night; watch their drinks to avoid date rape drugs.</p> <p>4. Identify peer and parent attitudes toward sex. Affirm positive influences and dispel myths. For example, “it is great that you and your friends always use condoms. However, using two condoms at the same time does not increase your safety and can cause condoms to break.”</p> <p>5. If not using contraceptives, explore why. Identify barriers to use and try to identify solutions. For example, if a teen is worried about confidentiality, revisit confidentiality with the teen.</p>

↳ TIPS

- ▶ Revisit the teen’s sexual history during each visit. Try and understand the social, cultural and cognitive circumstances of the sexual activity. Use this as an opportunity to either educate or remind the teen of safer sexual behaviors and risk reduction strategies.
- ▶ Acknowledge and reaffirm positive behaviors and choices. Whenever possible, deliver some positive feedback to the teen.
- ▶ Applaud teens for making an informed decision to remain abstinent or become sexually active.
- ▶ Use harm reduction and motivational interviewing techniques to encourage behavior change. For more information on motivational interviewing, refer to pg. 6.
- ▶ Encourage parent child communication. For more information on parent-teen communication, refer to pg. 7.
- ▶ Discuss the importance and meaning of healthy relationships. For more information on healthy relationships, refer to pg. 9.
- ▶ Keep in mind that some teens may be having sex for reasons not outlined about (sex to get pregnant or test fertility, survival sex). Use motivational interviewing and harm reduction techniques to explore these issues.

¹SexSmarts Survey. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001.

²Fantasia HC. Concept Analysis: Sexual Decision-Making in Adolescence. *Nursing Forum*. 2008; 43(2).

³Washington Summit on Learning Disabilities. 1994.

⁴Whitaker, 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.

Sources:

- 1) Weiss UJA. Let us talk about it: Safe adolescent sexual decision-making. *J of the Amer Acad of Nurse Practitioners*. 2007; 450-458.
- 2) Fantasia HC. Concept Analysis: Sexual Decision-Making in Adolescence. *Nursing Forum*. 2008; 43(2).
- 3) Planned Parenthood. Sex and Alcohol: Some Sobering Thoughts.