

#BeMoreDaring



TALKING TO YOUR TEEN ABOUT SEX

FOR PARENTS, GUARDIANS AND CAREGIVERS





TIP BOX



FEATURE BOX



ACTION BOX



PROMPT BOX



WHO WE ARE

bumb'INGOMSO – an isiXhosa phrase meaning “mould the future”
– is a multi-faceted HIV prevention project that supports
and empowers young people to fulfil their potential by
connecting them to key resources, support and networks.

WHY TALKING ABOUT SEX MATTERS

This booklet is for parents and caregivers who want to talk with their
teens about sex but don't know where to start. But first, let's dispel a
myth: talking openly about sex doesn't make teens more likely to have it.
In fact, it helps them delay sex, use protection and make safer choices.

WHAT'S CHANGING IN YOUR TEEN'S WORLD

Teenagers today grow up in a world very different from the one their parents knew. Social media, WhatsApp groups, TikTok and online videos influence their identity and shape how they understand relationships and sex. They are exposed to explicit sexual images and videos without the necessary messages about protection and responsibility.

Just like for the generations before them, adolescence remains a time of great upheaval, with rapid changes in teens' bodies, brains, emotions and social world. They face peer pressure, act impulsively, feel curious, over-confident, insecure, overwhelmed and confused about their feelings, friendships and romantic interests. They still need your guidance and wisdom. When parents misunderstand or dismiss their challenges, teens often turn to friends or the internet for guidance, which can lead them to dangerous sources of misinformation.

You have a unique role in your teenager's life to correct common myths and guide them through these crucial years safely. You can support them by listening, asking questions and showing empathy. For example, instead of instructing them in the rules ("Don't do that"), you can start a discussion by asking, "What do you know about this?" The goal should be building trust and encouraging honesty.

As you think about how to guide your teen, remember that adolescence happens in three main stages over several years. The way you talk about sex should grow with them.

At age 12, discussions may focus on puberty and body changes. By 14, peer pressure and boundaries may be more relevant. At 17, conversations may shift to consent, contraception and decision-making.



STAGE	WHAT'S HAPPENING	HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT
Early teens (11–13)	Their bodies begin to change, and they become curious about sex. Masturbation is common. Girls' development is ahead of boys. They compare themselves to their peers, who influence their interests and clothing styles.	Keep conversations factual and direct. Answer their questions honestly in simple words. Talk about the normal changes that happen during puberty (like breast development, acne, erections, periods, wet dreams) and also about masturbation, sexual orientation and how reproduction works. Reassure them that changes are normal and happen at different speeds.
Middle teens (14–16)	Romantic interests grow stronger. They are more concerned about being sexually attractive. Peer pressure increases, as does exposure to sexual content online or in conversations.	Give more detailed information about puberty and the physical and emotional changes that come with it. Discuss pregnancy, contraception, STIs and what safe sex is. Help them understand how alcohol or drugs affect self-control. Talk about peer pressure, boundaries and consent. Focus on healthy role models and help them develop goals for the future.
Late teens (17–19)	They want more independence. Many start sexual relationships. They usually have a clear sexual identity, though they may hide this if it is not accepted in their family. They think more like adults but still need guidance.	Reinforce the responsibility for contraception and STI testing. Continue talking about handling peer pressure, alcohol and drugs. Discuss delaying sex and alternative ways to express intimacy, as well as signs of an unhealthy relationship (control, pressure, manipulation) and what to do in the case of sexual harassment or abuse.

How do I know what to say when?

There is no easy answer to this, but generally if a child is old enough to ask a question, they are ready to hear an honest answer, even if it's short and simple.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you start, reflect on how you feel about sex and talking about it. Parents often feel nervous because sex is a sensitive topic they rarely discussed with their own parents. It will help to ground yourself if you can first acknowledge where you're coming from. Ask yourself:

- What values and beliefs do I want to share?
- What experiences have shaped how I think about sex and relationships?
- What makes me uncomfortable, and how can I manage it?



It's normal to feel shy or uncomfortable, as well as to admit this: "This feels awkward for me, but we need to talk about it." Teens respond better when adults are being honest.

CLARIFY YOUR GOALS AND VALUES

Understanding your goals is also important. There are three basic behaviour strategies you can choose to promote:

1. Abstain from sex until they get married.
2. Delay sex until a certain age or commitment in a relationship.
3. Have sex responsibly and safely, regardless of when.

Think about whether the message you would give a daughter is different from that for a son. If so, think about why. Also, check if you and your partner have the same expectations? If not, try discussing this beforehand to decide what your strategy is. Identifying what your standards are and having clear goals will help to focus your conversations. It will also help you explain your position if your teen disagrees with you or has different values.



Sex, like fire, has incredible power. In the right place – with care, respect and responsibility – it brings warmth and connection. But out of control or handled carelessly, it can harm you and those around you.

Reflect on when sex is a good thing and when it can be dangerous. Your job is to help your teen learn how to handle something as powerful as sex safely.

SET THE SCENE

Where and when you talk matters as much as what you say. Choose relaxed moments, like walking together or cooking, when neither of you is rushed or stressed. Don't bring it up in anger or frustration. Sometimes sitting side by side is less intense than face to face.

Privacy is essential: don't expect your teen to open up if they feel someone's going to overhear them. Use neutral, friendly body language. Try not to cross your arms, sigh, frown or raise your eyebrows. You can signal openness by nodding occasionally and keeping your voice calm.



Neutral body language says:
"I'm listening. I care. You can talk to me."

What if your teen doesn't want to talk?

If your teen avoids discussing sexual topics with you, reassure them that it's normal to feel uncomfortable about it, but explain that it's a very important conversation to have with you for their safety and well-being. Ask openly why they're avoiding the topic, listen carefully and try problem-solve together. If they really find it too hard with you as their parent, find someone you both respect who they can speak to.



BREAK THE ICE

When starting a conversation about a topic like sex, it helps to have some ice breakers prepared. Everyday events, media clips or observations can help you begin.

For example:

- "I read/heard/watched something today about [any topic]. What do you think about it?"
- "Other teens your age are into [any topic]. How do you feel about it?"

Open-ended questions are better than yes/no questions. For example:

- How do you feel when friends talk about [any topic]?
- If you could ask adults any question about [any topic], what would it be?

Use examples from daily life, such as situations at school or with friends to make conversations relatable. You can also share stories from your own adolescence, without going into all the details, to show that it's normal to learn about these topics.

Breaking the ice just takes an easy chat to open the door for future conversations. When you make a trusting space by listening and keeping things relaxed, your teen learns it's safe to talk. If you do this regularly, over time, these moments make bigger discussions easier.



HOW TO LISTEN AND RESPOND THOUGHTFULLY

Teens can tell when adults are going to lecture them, so if you want them to open up you need to show genuine interest and listen carefully.

HOW TO LISTEN ACTIVELY

- Pay full attention. Make sure there are no distractions.
- Keep comfortable eye contact or sit side by side.
- Allow them to finish what they're saying before you speak.
- Notice their body language, tone and expressions – are they nervous, defensive, sad, guarded?
- Acknowledge what they're feeling. This is not the same as agreeing with everything they do. It's about building trust by understanding their emotions. Things like, "That sounds tough." Or "I can see how disappointing that was."
- Ask open-ended questions: "Can you tell me more about what that was like?"
- Nod or show give small encouragements, like "I see", or "Go on".
- Repeat what you heard in your own words to check that you understood correctly. For example, "So, you're saying you're worried about ...?" "You felt angry when ...".
- Thank them for sharing, even if you're surprised or upset by something they say.



Teens who feel heard and understood are more likely to share concerns, make safe choices and come back to you when they need help.

HOW TO RESPOND THOUGHTFULLY

Responding thoughtfully means staying calm. If your teen says something that upsets you, take a breath before replying. Try not to react with shock, anger, disbelief or immediate correction. Rather say: "I understand why you see it like that. Let's talk about it."

It's okay to admit if you don't know an answer. If you're unsure, look it up together. This models problem-solving and openness.

You can remember these principles as the L.O.V.E. approach:

Listen carefully

Observe their body language

Validate by acknowledging their feelings

Empathise with their feelings

GUIDE WITH VALUES, NOT FEAR

It can be tempting to try scare or shame your teen into behaving in a certain way, but this sort of fear-based approach often doesn't last. Instead, try guide them towards healthy choices for themselves. Help them focus on the kind of relationship they want, such as a respectful, loving, committed partnership. Explain how to set goals to achieve that.

For example:

- **Relationships:** Build trust, respect and open communication; choose partners who treat you kindly; wait until both of you are ready for sexual activity.
- **Health:** Learn about STIs and contraception; make decisions that protect your physical and emotional well-being; avoid putting yourself into risky situations with alcohol, drugs or unsafe people.
- **Self-development:** Focus on education, hobbies and personal growth; strengthen self-confidence and self-respect; practice responsible decision-making.

This approach turns sexual education into a positive conversation about values and decision-making.



KEY TOPICS TO COVER OVER TIME

Teens learn better when conversations unfold over time, according to the level appropriate to their current development. These are the important ones to cover gradually.

PUBERTY AND BODY CHANGES

Explain the physical and emotional changes that happen during adolescence, including growth, hormonal changes and sexual development. Normalize questions about periods, erections, mood changes and body image. Emphasise that everyone develops at their own pace.

Sample questions:

- How do you feel about the changes happening to your body?
- Do you have any questions about the way your body has changed?



Use resources like [bwisehealth.com](https://www.bwisehealth.com) to help you.

READINESS AND EMOTIONS

Discuss emotional readiness for romantic relationships. Reflect on feelings (having a crush versus real love), sexual attraction and the consequences of sexual activity. Talk about peer pressure, and encourage teens to consider their values before making decisions about sex.

Sample questions:

- How do you think having sex changes a relationship?
- How can you tell if you're ready for a relationship or intimacy?

CONSENT AND BOUNDARIES

Teach your teen that they always have the right to say no and must respect others' no. Make sure they understand that healthy boundaries are important not only for their body but their time, mental energy, social life and emotions, even in an intimate relationship. Discuss power imbalances that make it hard to say no. Alert them to the dangers of adults grooming them slowly with gifts and attention, and explain how it often leads to sexual abuse.

Sample questions:

- When you hear the word consent/boundaries, what does it mean to you?
- Has someone ever ignored you when you said no? Or have you felt afraid to say no?
- How do you set boundaries with people you care about?

Groomers



Watch out for adults who give excessive attention, gifts or send private messages to your teen. Repeat that no adult should ever ask them to keep secrets or touch them sexually.

HEALTHY VERSUS UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Highlight healthy relationship qualities like respect, honesty, assertiveness, equality and trust. Contrast these with unhealthy qualities, like controlling, insulting, jealous, manipulative or abusive behaviour. Alert them to the different types of abuse in relationships: physical, emotional, sexual and economic, and the warning signs of gender-based violence. Warn of the dangers of young women getting into “blesser” relationships with older wealthy men (exploitation, STIs, financial dependency, disrupted education).

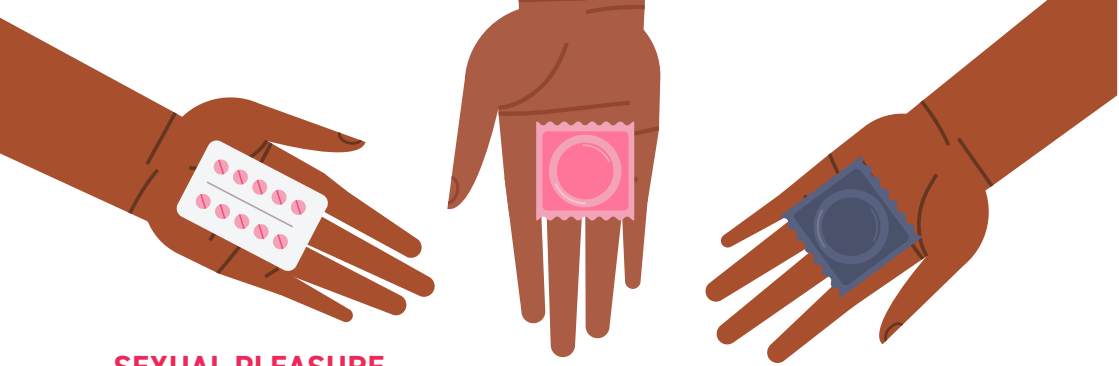
Sample questions:

- What do you think the signs are of a healthy/unhealthy relationship?
- What are the dangers of getting into a “blesser” relationship?

When a relationship ends



It's important for teens to know that ending a relationship is a normal part of growing up. Sometimes the initial attraction fades, sometimes it's necessary to leave an unhealthy relationship. Let your teen know that breakups are painful but can also be done in a healthy way, and that you'll support them no matter what. Reinforce that no one should ever feel trapped, afraid or pressured to stay in a relationship.



SEXUAL PLEASURE

Discuss what sex is and different ways of releasing sexual tension, reaching orgasm and enjoying sexual intimacy apart from intercourse (which is penetrative): masturbation (alone or with a partner), outercourse (non-penetrative with a partner), oral sex, sex toys and anal sex. Alert your teen to the fact that nobody under the age of 16 can legally consent to sex in South Africa. The law considers it statutory rape in order to protect teens from being exploited by adults.

Sample questions:

- Why do you think the law says no one under 16 can legally consent to sex?
- Why would a couple choose sexual activities that don't involve intercourse?

PROTECTION AND BIRTH CONTROL

Talk about pregnancy, safe sex, condoms and other types of contraception (the pill, injection, loop, implant). Describe common sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, how serious the side effects can be and how to treat them at a local clinic.

Make sure they know of both PrEP and PEP medicines to help prevent HIV, either before (PrEP) or after (PEP) exposure. Explain that condoms (male or female types) prevent both pregnancy and STIs, and make sure your teen knows where to get them and how to use them properly. Stress the importance of using protection consistently and talking openly with your partner about it. Also discuss the need for good hygiene to prevent urinary tract infections.

Sample questions:

- What kinds of methods do you know of to avoid pregnancy and STIs?
- Why do you think couples sometimes don't use protection, even when one of them wants to?

ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

Discuss the reasons young people experiment with alcohol or drugs – to fit in, escape stress or cope with difficult emotions – and how quickly dependent can develop. Brainstorm healthier ways to cope with stress or pain (e.g. exercise, sleep, connect with friends, join clubs). Explain the very real risks in South Africa of car accidents (1 in 3 road fatalities are linked to alcohol), unsafe sex (1 in 4 rape cases involve alcohol), violence (more than 1 in 10 serious assaults) and long-term health damage to your organs from drinking alcohol.

Make sure they know about foetal alcohol syndrome, and how alcohol and drugs in the body of a pregnant woman permanently damage their unborn babies. Talk about pressure from peers and social media, and what to do if you're already tried substances and are struggling with addiction. Remind them they can always come to you for help.

South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence

SANCA provides comprehensive addiction prevention, treatment and rehabilitation services.

Helpline: 086 14 72622

WhatsApp Support: 076 535 1701



TEENAGE PREGNANCY

Discuss what teenage parenthood means – the negative impact it has on finishing school, studying further, spending time with friends, being able to work and earn a living. Also explain what the options are if this should happen: continue with the pregnancy, give the baby up for adoption or terminate the pregnancy. Highlight the dangers of backstreet termination of pregnancy, which cause many women to die.

Reach out to a social worker confidentially or call Marie Stopes SA for advice on where to safely terminate pregnancy.

Toll-free phone: 0800 11 77 85 | WhatsApp Live Chat: 060 094 9173



GENDER NORMS, SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

Let teens know it is normal to explore their sexual identity and that they are loved and accepted regardless of who they are. Discuss gender expectations for both men and women, and what each partner needs to have a healthy relationship based on equality and respect.

Sample questions:

- What messages do you think girls and boys get about sex? Are they different?
- Have you seen someone being treated unfairly because they didn't fit into gender norms?
- What gender expectations affect which sports they play, subjects they study, jobs they do or emotions they are allowed to express?

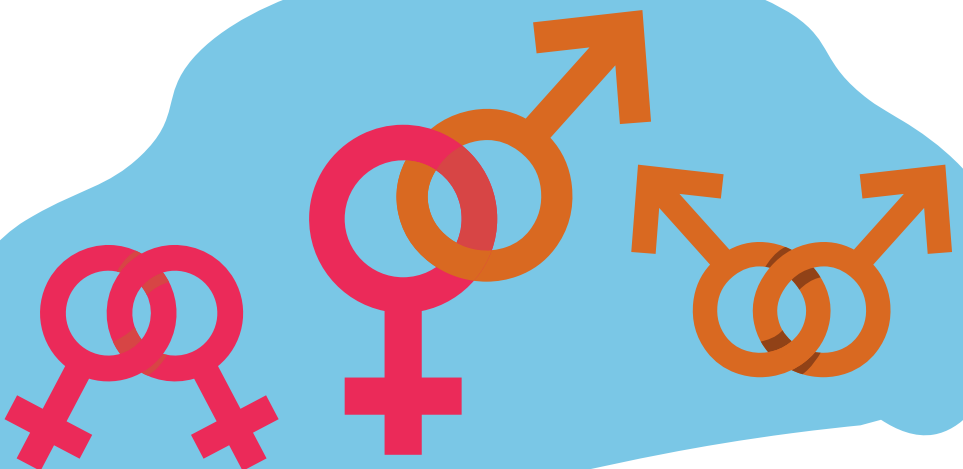
Supporting LGBTQI+ teens

South African law protects the right to love and marry freely, but many LGBTQI+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex) young people still face bullying, discrimination and violence. Your openness and love can make all the difference. If you or your teen need extra support to handle difficult questions around their sexuality, you can contact:

The Triangle Project: triangle.org.za

OUT LGBT Wellbeing: out.org.za

LifeLine: 0861 322 322



MEDIA INFLUENCE AND MISINFORMATION

Explore unhealthy messages about sex and relationships that teens get from social media, music, peers and other sources. Discuss unrealistic expectations, comparisons to idealised body images online, and how some media normalises forceful sex. Help teens separate myths from reality and understand what real relationships look like.

Sample questions:

- Do you ever compare your body to people you see online? How realistic do you think these images are?
- What do you think is real and what is exaggerated about sex in movies or online?



PORNOGRAPHY AND ONLINE SAFETY

Explain that pornography is not real life, is often abusive for the people being videoed, and creates unrealistic expectations of a healthy sexual relationship. Discuss the risks of sexting (sending sexual photos or messages), sextortion (extorting money or sexual favours with threats), and how to protect yourself online.

Make sure they understand that their digital life can have a huge impact on their real life, even on future job opportunities.

Remind them never to post anything (like nude pictures and private information) that could damage their reputation or put them in danger.

Sample questions:

- How do you think porn affects what people expect from sex?
- How would you handle someone asking you to send nude pictures?



COMMON PARENTING MISTAKES TO AVOID

It's easy to make mistakes when talking to teens about sex, but being aware of some of the most common ones can help you avoid them.

Being unprepared: Questions about contraception, sexting, abortion, HIV, masturbation or relationships that catch you by surprise. Brushing these off with “You're too young” or “I don't want to talk about that” misses a chance to guide them safely. If they're asking the question, it's better you give them an honest answer than leave them to ask someone else. Prepare some answers ahead of time, or use trusted resources like www.bwisehealth.com.

Giving speeches instead of listening: A long, one-sided talk shuts down conversation. Instead of just telling them what you think, ask open-ended questions to spark a discussion.

Mocking or overreacting: Laughing at a question, or showing anger or disgust, teaches teens that they cannot trust you with sensitive topics.

Moralising or shaming: Saying things like “If you'd listened to me, this wouldn't have happened” increases guilt and shame. If you repeatedly send messages that you are right and they are wrong, they will learn to hide their mistakes from you. It's more important that they can come to you when they've messed up and learn from the experience with your support.

Minimizing feelings: Saying “It's not a big deal”, “You're just being hormonal” or “You'll get over it” can make your teen feel small and squashed. Instead, try: “Tell me more about what that was like for you.”

Being judgemental: Comments like “You always do this.” or “You shouldn't feel that way” creates defensiveness. Focus on understanding their experience, not on judging their choices.

Giving advice too quickly: Even well-meant advice can feel harsh if the person isn't ready for it. Young people often want to feel understood more than told what to do. Listening calmly helps them find their own answers.

Jumping to conclusions: When adults assume they already know what a young person is thinking or doing, it makes them feel accused and stops them asking for advice. Give them time to explain things in their own words: “I want to understand – can you help me see it from your side?”

RESOURCES

Parents do not have to handle these conversations alone. There are many resources to help you answer questions confidently.

HELPLINES

- Childline South Africa – free, confidential helpline for children and concerned adults
116 (free from any network)
- LoveLife – for questions about sexual health and relationships.
0800 121 900
- Parentline SA – WhatsApp support & referrals for parents/ caregivers
WhatsApp: 087 813 4290
- TEARS Foundation – confidential support for victims of sexual/ gender-based violence (GBV)
08000 TEARS / 08000 83277 | Please call me: *134*7355#

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- Youth-friendly clinics offer advice on contraception, STI testing and general health.
- School counsellors and social workers can help with guidance, emotional support and accessing services.



Keep a list of organisations and phone numbers visible and encourage your teen to use them.

STAY CONNECTED

The ultimate goal of parenting a teenager is to prepare them to become a responsible, independent adult. This means gradually giving them more freedom while setting clear boundaries and guiding them to make their own decisions.

It takes patience and consistency as they learn from mistakes and build confidence to handle challenges. Part of this growth is understanding and learning to manage their sexuality.

They need your support throughout, so check in regularly to remind them you're always there. By talking openly, listening actively and encouraging questions, you strengthen your bond and empower them to make safe choices for their future.

GET IN TOUCH

bumb'INGOMSO is here for you.

Nothing is ever too small or unimportant.

Please get in touch:

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