

What Teens Need To Know About Sex

Ages 13-17



 **FamilyLife**®

Developed in partnership with Authentic Intimacy.



First, make sure you've covered—and your child is familiar with—all the principles in What Preteens Need To Know About Sex.

What you need to know about their body and the body of the opposite sex:

Your teen is experiencing a surge of hormones.

Puberty is activated by a certain set of hormones, including estrogen/progesterone and testosterone. This surge in hormones has a significant physical, emotional, and cognitive effect. It is vital to note that the dominant hormones in boys and girls are different, and the effects on the mind, body, and emotions of the teenager are different, too. During puberty, boys experience a 20-fold rise in testosterone, while girls experience a 10-fold rise in estrogen.

Testosterone triggers the development of the sex organs and the production of semen, as well as growth spurts, hair growth on the face, underarms, and pubic area, higher sexual desire and libido, deepening of the voice, and increasing muscle mass and bone density. Testosterone has also been linked to mood swings, aggression, and risk-taking.



Estrogen is responsible for the growth of the uterus and vagina, the development of breasts, hair growth on underarms and the pubic area, fat distribution around the hips, thighs and breasts, and growth spurts. Estrogen is also the dominant hormone in the regulation of the menstrual cycle. This cycle means that girls experience cyclical hormone changes each month, creating significant emotional fluctuations, including depression, anxiety, and reduced memory.

What this looks like:

- While hormones are often talked about in relation to teen girls, the effect of hormones on boys is not as recognized. But your son is being flooded with testosterone, an extremely productive and powerful hormone that is developing his sexuality, physicality, and emotions, and which often results in angry outbursts, irritability, and impulsive behavior.

For many different reasons, boys often struggle with expressing their inner life. Parents can play a vital role in giving a boy a safe space to talk about his emotions. Something as simple as inviting your son out for a beverage or a dinnertime routine of asking everyone to tell the “highs and lows” of their day can develop into an invaluable tool for emotional expression—especially more difficult or negative emotions. As a father, asking your son questions about his inner life can play a key role in showing that healthy male relationships can discuss emotions. Mentors can play a valuable role here, too.

- Your daughter is riding a rollercoaster of hormones each month, with two to three significant changes between her cycles. She may seem energetic, productive, and happy for a while, then have a few days where she seems content



and even-keeled and “like herself,” before becoming lethargic, moody, angry, anxious, and/or hungry for a few days. Your goal is not to ride the rollercoaster with her, but as it’s been said, to be the person waiting on the platform. Be a steady, loving presence who can listen to her outbursts, comfort her in stress, and help her brainstorm strategies for managing fluctuating hormones.

Teens have an increased need for autonomy, independence, and boundaries.

Your child is developing into an adult, and one goal of the teenage path is to become independent. Your teen needs space to develop friendships, make their own decisions (and mistakes), and have time to be alone.

What this looks like:

- Your teen will crave privacy, whether to be alone with friends, to have privacy on screens or social media, or to decompress after a long day. Be discerning as you work with your teen in this area, as their desire for privacy may override healthy behavior. There is a huge difference between respecting the privacy and comfort allotted a 13-year-old and an 18-year-old—or the boundaries necessary if a teen is struggling with depression or engaging in high-risk behavior. The teen years will be a path for both of you in learning when your teen is ready for more independence as the result of responsible behavior.
- Help your teen by creating healthy boundaries when it comes to independence and privacy. Rules like “No phones at bedtime or the dinner table” or “Keep your door open when your girlfriend’s over” are examples of healthy limits for your teen.
- Teens need to learn someone will see everything they do online. Consider, as a privilege of them having a phone, communicating at the outset that they will need to willingly surrender to your random checks of their device. Many tools and settings will allow you access to your teen’s messages or social media accounts so you can monitor their activity and help them learn to navigate a very complicated social network before they launch into adulthood.

Still, remain wise about how to use this privilege, especially as your teen edges toward complete independence. Yes, predators, porn, and sexting are real dangers. But policing your child unnecessarily can exasperate your child (Ephesians 6:4) and destroy the trust you’re attempting to build and maintain on both sides, a vital bridge in complicated years.

So choose to exercise discernment—asking God for generous wisdom (James 1:5)—rather than give way to fear (1 Peter 3:6). Does your child sense your empowering respect of their space and decisions about life? Are you working hand-in-hand to launch them into adulthood, or squaring off—so they can't wait to leave physically, emotionally, and spiritually?

In parenting teens, consider motivating them as often as you can with the person they want to be and goals you share.

Romantic feelings and attractions become more intense.

Testosterone and estrogen instigate and regulate sexual desire, and this surge in sexual hormones leave some teens feeling consumed with romantic thoughts and sexual urges and desires. Teens might develop crushes, begin dating, or experiment with romantic relationships or sexual orientation at this time. Their relationships might become more complex as they navigate conflict, sexual identity, breakups, and negative sexual experiences. Keep in mind what is normal is not necessarily healthy. This may be an important distinction for you to help your teen navigate challenges of romance and sexuality.

What this looks like:

- Your daughter and her friends might be obsessed with celebrity crushes or discussions of school romances. She might post “edits” or collages of celebrities on her social media account or hang posters on her bedroom wall. Be aware that this generation has a very fluid sexuality, and your teen may be attracted to boys and/or girls, and people with various sexual orientations. Also, their preferences may change and shift often.



- Teens are now less likely to form structured romantic relationships, such as boyfriend or girlfriend, and are much more comfortable with fluid or casual relationships. These “situationships” enable teens to experiment with different romantic partners, sexual orientations, or experiences without being tied down to one person or even one sexual identity.
- Social media and messaging are the central staging ground for most teen romantic encounters. If your teen says they are talking with someone, they likely mean messaging. Some romantic relationships begin with sexting (texting each other nude photos of each other). Social media, YouTube, and certain gaming platforms are primary sources of porn for many teens. (See section on Cyber Civics below!)
- In Barna’s study of Gen Z, 37% (more than any other generation) claim “my gender/sexuality are very important to my sense of self.”¹ So while your teen may be experiencing romantic feelings or desires, finding a romantic partner or an outlet for these desires becomes less significant than discovering her sexual identity. Romantic relationships and sexual encounters become primarily the means to exploring and discovering sexual identity, rather than primarily a way to connect with another person or find sexual release.

37% of Gen Z say my gender/sexuality is very important to my sense of self.



Teens are very worried about their body, appearance, and features.

Changes in their bodies, conflicting cultural messages, and curated and filtered social media feeds all contribute high anxiety about teens’ own physical appearance. This anxiety can lead to unhealthy behaviors such as eating disorders, extreme diets, and anxiety disorders.

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-questions-answered/>

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-questions-answered/>

What this looks like:

Be aware of the conflicting messages being thrown at your teen. For example, a girl (and sometimes boys) might feel pressure to be accepting of herself, healthy and fit, and super hot, but all without seeming to try too hard. Ask your teen questions to help them think through some of these messages, like, “Do you think teens face a lot of pressure to look a certain way?” Or “What do you think it means to be healthy?”

- If you notice signs of an eating or anxiety disorder, seek professional help for your teen. A therapist or counselor will be able to give your teen lots of helpful, proven methods for dealing with these issues.

Recognize that there are probably also underlying emotional issues at play, and while working through these things can be incredibly difficult, it can lead to greater mental health and resilience for your teen.

- Encourage your teen to engage in physical activities without an emphasis on beauty or appearance. Playing a sport, going on an evening walk, swimming in the ocean, or babysitting are all activities that could help your teen engage with their body and view it as reliable, useful, and meaningful apart from physical appearance.

Understanding terms and vocabulary:

Mental Health

Anxiety

A general feeling of unease, worry, or fear that arises in response to a perceived threat or danger, whether real or imagined. It is a common emotional response to stress and can manifest in various ways, such as nervousness, restlessness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, muscle tension, and sleep disturbances. Anxiety can be a normal and adaptive reaction in certain situations, but when it becomes persistent and excessive, interfering with daily life, it may be classified as an anxiety disorder.

<p>Anxiety attack (panic attack)</p>	<p>An intense and sudden episode of overwhelming fear or discomfort. It is characterized by a rapid onset of intense physical and psychological symptoms that often peak within a few minutes and can last up to an hour. Some common symptoms of an anxiety attack include a pounding heart, chest pain or tightness, shortness of breath, trembling, sweating, dizziness, feeling disconnected from reality, and fear of losing control or dying. Panic attacks can be triggered by specific situations or occur unexpectedly, and they can be very distressing for the person experiencing them.</p>
<p>Suicidal ideation</p>	<p>Thoughts, fantasies, or contemplation about ending one's life. It is a serious mental health concern and should be taken seriously. Suicidal ideation can vary in intensity and frequency, ranging from fleeting thoughts to persistent and intrusive contemplation of suicide. If you suspect that someone may be experiencing suicidal ideation, it is essential to take the situation seriously.</p>
<p>Eating disorder</p>	<p>A serious mental health condition characterized by abnormal eating habits and thoughts related to food, body weight, and body image. People with eating disorders often have a distorted perception of their body shape and weight, leading to harmful behaviors and negative health consequences. Eating disorders can have severe short- and long-term physical and emotional consequences, affecting various body systems and mental well-being. These disorders are often associated with feelings of shame, guilt, and low self-esteem, making it challenging for individuals to seek help. Signs of an eating disorder include but are not limited to drastic weight changes, preoccupation with body weight and shape, restrictive eating patterns, binge eating, or purging behaviors. Check out Axis' parent guide on eating disorders for more information, as well as their guides on body positivity and fitness.</p>

Common Dating Terminology

Stay up to date on teen slang with Axis' parent guide.

<p>Sexting</p>	<p>The act of sending sexually explicit or suggestive messages, photos, or videos via electronic communication, such as text messages, social media platforms, or instant messaging. See Axis' parent guide to sexting.</p>
<p>Ghosting</p>	<p>When someone abruptly cuts off communication with a person they were dating or talking to, without any explanation or warning.</p>

Benching	Keeping someone "on the bench" or in reserve while pursuing other dating options. It involves not fully committing to a person but keeping them as a backup plan.
Catfishing	Creating a fake online persona or identity to deceive others, often for the purpose of romantic or emotional manipulation.
DTR	"Define the Relationship" This is when two people in a casual dating scenario have a conversation to determine the status and exclusivity of their relationship.
FWB	"Friends with Benefits." This refers to two people who are friends and engage in sexual activities without having a committed romantic relationship.
Love Bombing	Overwhelming someone with excessive affection and attention to manipulate or control them emotionally.
Polyamory	A practice that falls on the spectrum of Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM) of having multiple romantic or sexual relationships with the consent of all parties involved.

Currently, research demonstrates one out of six people (16.8%) desire to engage in polyamory, and one out of nine people (10.7%) have engaged in polyamory at some point during their life. Approximately one out of 15 people (6.5%) reported they knew someone who has been or is currently engaged in polyamory.²

It's critical that as culture evolves on this front, we and our kids stay aware and Christians remain engaged in cultural conversations (see Matthew 5:13-16).

Related terms to help you remain informed:

- **Vee:** One person acting as a hinge—a "V"—between two people who are dating the same person, but not dating each other (these two are called metamours).
- **Triad or throuple:** All three view each other equally as a partner.
- **Quad:** Four-person version of throuple.

² Moors AC, Gesselman AN, Garcia JR. Desire, Familiarity, and Engagement in Polyamory: Results From a National Sample of Single Adults in the United States. *Front Psychol.* 2021 Mar 23;12:619640. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.619640. PMID: 33833712; PMCID: PMC8023325.

5 Important Conversations with Your Teen



1. Dating

Even if you've already talked to your teen about puberty and sex, don't forget to have intentional, ongoing conversations about dating and romantic relationships. For starters, your teen needs to know they can and should say no to any sexual pressure or manipulation. Coach your teen about appropriate physical boundaries for every level of relationships (getting to know each other, dating, engaged).

Let them know both boys and girls are responsible for controlling their own bodies, and for respecting and truly loving another person's body in ways that are patient, kind, not rude, not selfishly demanding (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). The late pastor Timothy Keller observes, "When we try to have sex with someone without giving them our whole lives in marriage, we violate a bodily boundary and use them rather than serve them."³

But it's important, too, to have conversations about dating outside the context of sex, so your teen comes to understand sex is not the most important part of a romantic relationship. Instead, focus on values like kindness, respect, responsibility, and honesty, while talking to your teen about what it looks like to engage with someone they like in good, healthy, and meaningful ways.⁴ And don't miss [Axis' parent guide on teen dating](#).

³ Keller, Timothy and Kathy. *God's Wisdom for Navigating Life: A Year of Daily Devotions in the Book of Proverbs*. New York City: Viking (2017), p. 243.

⁴ <https://axis.org/resource/teen-dating/>

What this looks like:

- Teens' development toward adulthood is progressing slower than previous eras,⁵ so instead of thinking your child is ready to date at a certain age, it may be better to carefully consider your own child's readiness to determine whether or not they're ready to date. These questions will help you determine if your teen is ready to date.



Can they communicate well?



With what quality, wisdom, and thoughtfulness do they navigate other relationships?



How do you anticipate they would respond to the rejection and heartbreak of a breakup?



Are they a good judge of character?



How do they manage conflict and others' vulnerable emotions?



Have they proven themselves trustworthy with other responsibilities?

- Consider ways of easing your child into dating. Start with group activities or with a chaperone, so your child has a supportive network in these first forays into romantic relationships. Think about whether your child is mature enough to handle physical affection and what might be inappropriate for your teen.
- Remember that for many teens, romantic relationships will be much more fluid, online-oriented, and fueled by a pursuit of sexual identity. Draw out conversations about the nature of healthy relationships, helping your teen think through

⁵ <https://health.usnews.com/wellness/health-buzz/articles/2017-09-19/kids-are-actually-growing-up-slower-than-decades-past-report-says>

what it means to be kind and respectful of the other person, and how your teen can mature in their ability to have a full-fledged relationship with someone, including honest communication, healthy disagreement, and authentic connection.

If your teen is a Christian, talk about the goodness of God's plan for sexuality, and the big why behind His commands that make for great romance, marriage, and sex. In your conversations and your own decision-making, communicate your airtight trust of God's ways and boundaries even when you don't completely understand.



2. Sex

Now is the time to round out and complete your conversations about sex. While you may have relied upon more biological and physical descriptions of sex during childhood, now you can begin to discuss with your teen the true power and potential of sex. Focus on the good qualities of sex first, so your teen can relate to it in a positive way, before giving true accounts of the misuses and abuses of sex.

What this looks like:

- If you're a Christian, clearly articulate to your teen the purpose of sex from a biblical perspective. Lay out the vision of marriage that demonstrates the self-giving, joyful, faithful, and intimate love of God for the other, and the purpose of sex within marriage to build closeness, bring pleasure, and generate life. Celebrate the elegance, safety, and love of this vision for sex in your conversations with your teen, so that it's clear that for all the "prohibitions" of the Christian sexual ethic—designed to give true freedom—there's an articulate, cohesive and positive vision for the proper use and enjoyment of sex.

You might use the example of the power of fire, creating warmth, light, comfort, cooking, and survival in the right places...and shocking destruction when running wild.

Another example: When confined to railroad tracks, trains can take you nearly anywhere on land. But when they run off the tracks, tremendous damage becomes imminent.

- Don't outsource your child's sexual education. Even if your child's school or youth group discuss sexuality, you don't know what is getting through to your child and what messages and tone are being gathered.

In the end, it's your responsibility to make sure your teen clearly understands all the biological components of sexual intercourse, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), what constitutes sexual abuse and consent, and the dangers of sexting, porn, catfishing, and sexual exploitation.

- Christian sex educator Kristen Miele reminds that even when you're teaching abstinence, your teen needs to hear from you—not a sex-ed class—about birth control. Your teen should know what birth control methods are, why people use them, why researching each method is important before use, and how couples prevent pregnancy or plan families.

Porn's Impact

40 million U.S. adults regularly visit porn sites, and **35% of all internet downloads** are porn-related. The average age for first exposure to pornography is, according to some statistics, as young as 9, and **50% of partnerships** suffer due to it.

Statistics compiled by **Covenant Eyes**.

- Clearly discuss masturbation, steering clear of shame (which differs from healthy guilt). Remember: Every conversation about sex with kids at every age ideally keeps in mind that you want them to be able to come to you when they need help.

So talk about what your family believes about masturbation, and why. Stay realistic about the sexual messages bombarding both teens of both sexes, as well as the power of adolescent drives. And present masturbation more as an issue of maturity rather than pure morality.

Perhaps begin a dialogue: Does masturbation always involve lust, fantasy, and self-focus? Is it appropriate, say, between a married couple in any circumstances?

For a more thorough walk-through, see [Axis' Parent Guide to Talking About Masturbation](#).

- It would be difficult to overestimate the harmful and ubiquitous impact porn has had on our understanding of sexuality. Studies convey that "40 million U.S. adults regularly visit porn sites, and 35% of all internet downloads are porn-related. The average age for first exposure to pornography is, according to some statistics, as young as 9, and 50% of partnerships suffer due to pornography."⁶

Research has proven porn normalizes objectification, negatively impacts present and future love and intimacy, promotes sexual violence, and literally alters brain chemicals and structure.⁷ Your teen is either directly or indirectly affected by porn, and you can do a great service to your teen by helping them understand the impact porn has on the brain, the way it distorts a healthy view of sex, and how to recover from a porn addiction. To dive deeper, check out [Axis' parent guide on talking to your teen about pornography](#).

⁶ <https://blog.gitnux.com/porn-addiction-statistics/>

⁷ <https://fightthenewdrug.org/get-the-facts/>



3. Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Your teen is likely using “gender identity” and “sexual identity” to describe two different concepts. *Sexual identity* typically means who you are attracted to, while *gender identity* describes how you see your gender.

Today, 1 in 4 teens identify as gay, bisexual or are questioning their sexual identity.⁸ That percentage goes up if you include emerging gender identities like “non-binary.” Either your teen identifies as something other than heterosexual, or many of their friends do.

Teens care deeply about gender identity and are passionate about LGBTQ rights, even if they agree with a biblical view of marriage. Additionally, gender and sexuality issues are often addressed in film, music, shows, and on social media. Be aware that your teen is watching how you respond to LGBTQ topics on the news, at church, and in media. If you react with disgust, anger, or a lack of willingness to compassionately understand the experience of LGBTQ people, your child will likely not want to talk with you about it.

This is a huge issue for your teen, one that daily or even hourly affects their thoughts, feelings, friendships, media consumption, and behavior.

What this looks like:

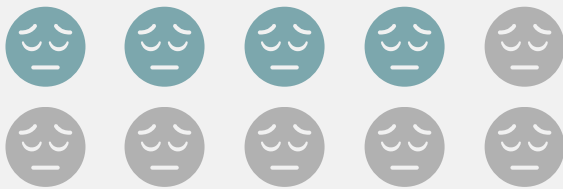
- Get to know your teen. Feelings and beliefs change often for a teenager, requiring intentional effort on your part to stay up to date on what’s going on inside their head. For many teens, figuring out their sexual orientation and gender identity is part of coming of age, like discovering their hobbies. It is no longer assumed by their peers that they are attracted to the opposite sex or that they identify with the gender that aligns with their biological sex.

Calmly and sincerely inquire if they’re questioning their sexuality, having thoughts and feelings about their friends’ sexual orientation, and how these things are affecting your teen’s life. No matter your own internal emotional response, work hard to be a steady, non-reactive, and compassionate listener if they choose to process these things with you.

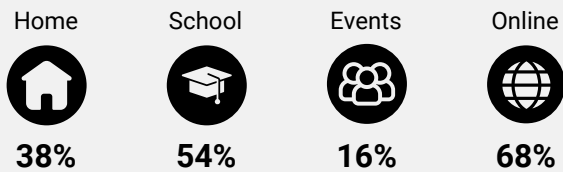
⁸ https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/supplemental-mmwr/students_by_sexual_identity.htm



41% of LGBTQ young people seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year



Affirming spaces among LGBTQ young people



The Trevor Project. (2023). 2023 U.S. national survey on the mental health of LGBTQ young people. [PDF]

- Know what you believe. Study Scripture. Read books on the topic. Talk to people you respect about your own questions and doubts. You can't give anything to your child that you don't have yourself. "Because the Bible says so" is not going to be satisfactory for your teen. Countless personalities online say, "The Bible actually doesn't say so." Christians aren't excluded from asking questions like, "Is sex difference inherent to what marriage *is*? If so, why?" "Are there really just two sexes? What about intersex people?"

Pray and ask God for wisdom and insight. Be ready for when your teen comes to you with questions, struggles, or pain. And then be confident in sharing what you believe! As always, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know," and then go spend time researching something before continuing the conversation. Read FamilyLife and Cru's official position on these topics [here](#).

- The CDC found nearly 70% of LGBTQ students "experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness" and are four times more likely to attempt suicide or be the victims of sexual violence.⁹

LGBTQ youth are suffering deeply, and our response should be to turn toward our children and their friends with compassion and loving acts of kindness, while offering stabilizing truth, boundaries, and consistency.

⁹ <https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>



4. Cyber Civics

Technological advances in the past century have drastically altered both day-to-day life and the quality of human connection. Your child’s adulthood will see even more changes and technological advances, but parents often do little to prepare their children for the online realities of their future.

Just like you would never hand your teen the keys to your car before spending many hours on driving instruction and practice, consider the ways you can instruct and then help your teen practice thoughtfully managing their online interactions, and loving God and people deeply.

What this looks like:

- Some parents write up a “technology contract” in which they outline family rules and values when it comes to the devices in the home.¹⁰ Before gaining the privilege of a device such as a phone, iPad, or computer, kids are given detailed boundaries and instructions on how they can be best used, and then the child must agree to the terms. This helps in many ways by requiring the parents to thoughtfully decide on best practice, teaching your kids what it means to establish limits for themselves, and having a basis for removing or reducing tech privileges.
- Establish regular times of being “screen free.” For example, a teen could commit to being screen free on a daily (at least one hour), weekly (one day), and annual basis (one week). Or a family could commit to being screen free together at bedtime or the dinner table. Help your child feel comfortable without a screen, engaging in meaningful relationships, conversations, pastimes, and time with God.

¹⁰ This is an excellent example: <https://greer.lt/content/choosing-to-be-tech-wise-with-your-kids>.

- Warn them about the dangers of porn, catfishing, and grooming. You can also engage with them by asking about their favorite feeds or accounts, videos, or video games. Ask them what their friends love to watch or what they like to do together online. This will help keep them from isolation or the harmful concept that their online self is separate from their IRL (In Real Life) self.

5. Sexuality and Pain

It's so hard to be a teen right now. Social media, sexual violence, and the proliferation of porn have created a social environment damaging to the sexuality of many kids. Your teen needs your understanding and your guidance as they walk this very dangerous, confusing and chaotic road.



What this looks like:

- Mental health issues (including anxiety and depression) can both feed into and stem from sexual questions and struggles. For example, a teen who is struggling with loneliness and sadness may seek comfort or validation through sexual acting out. Additionally, your teen may not have the emotional awareness to recognize feelings of shame from a struggle with pornography, sexual trauma, gender confusion, etc... The internal struggle might manifest in symptoms like feelings of unworthiness, depression, hopelessness, disordered eating, or anxiety. It is important not only to address sexual behavior but also to pay attention to the underlying mental and emotional struggles.
- Statistically, one in four girls and one in six boys have been sexually abused before the age of 18.¹¹ The survivor is usually victimized by a peer or someone they know, most often in their school, home, or neighborhood. Teens who experience sexual abuse may experience poor academic performance, sexual risk-taking, pregnancy, self-harm, and suffer from mental health disorders.

¹¹ https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications/2019-02/Teenagers_508.pdf

These chilling statistics can embolden you as a parent to inform and protect your child, and also confidently enforce limits and boundaries while addressing seriously any inappropriate behavior.

- Communicate to your child that their parents—and God, their heavenly father—love them so much there’s nothing they can do, or that can be done to them, that can make you love them more or less. It’s not what they do, or have, or what others think that makes them worthy in your eyes or God’s.

Then prove it to your child in your words, actions, and how you relate to and talk about God. But this love also means that you will look out for them and want what’s best for them no matter what. Like no good doctor would pretend someone isn’t sick or hurt, telling the truth and pursuing healing is part of love. Your love is always working for their best interest, even if it’s not always what they want or what they think will make them happy.¹²



One in four girls and **one in six** boys have been sexually abused before the age of 18.



¹² Adapted from the Postlude in this family contract: <https://greer.lt/content/choosing-to-be-tech-wise-with-your-kids>



What your teen may be curious about:

Who am I?

Adolescence has often been a time when individuals first begin to wrestle deeply with their own identities. In the past, identity might be set by your biology, family, socioeconomic status, culture, and nation. But in the modern era, identity is believed to be something that you discover or create for yourself. For example, you are no longer connected to your biological gender, but must discover your gender identity from literally around a hundred options.¹³ There is also a new emphasis on “found family”—family formed not on biological ties, but uniformity of ideas and preferences.

Most teens today are not only wrestling with their own identity, but crushed by the burden of crafting their identity out of limitless options. Even if they don't question their biological sex or sexual orientation, choosing pronouns or claiming a gender identity is a way of seeking shelter from societal pressures to “discover” their identity. Pastor Henri Nouwen said we believe three lies about why we're valuable:

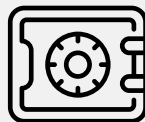
Three Lies



I am what I do. (I'm talented, helpful, or unique.)



I am what others say or think about me. (I'm loved or respected.)



I am what I have. (I want control, comfort, or safety. I have family, friends, possessions, or reputation.)

¹³ <https://www.sexualdiversity.org/edu/1111.php>

These lies taunt us every day—inflating the balloon of our ego when everything works out, deflating us when it doesn't. Tragically, these lies never deliver fulfillment. It's like God's words in Jeremiah 2:13 imply: "My people have committed a compound sin: they've walked out on me, the fountain of fresh flowing waters, and then dug cisterns—cisterns that leak, cisterns that are no better than sieves" (MSG).

Instead, God gives us and our kids unchanging, solid value. He tugs us out of the daily courtroom determining our worth. Because

Three Truths



Jesus has done enough. (2 Corinthians 3:4-6, 5:21, Hebrews 10:14)



God accepts us because of Jesus. (Romans 5:1, 8, John 1:12, 6:37)



He gives us everything we need. (2 Corinthians 9:8, 12:9, Philippians 4:12-13, 19)

You don't have to keep wearing yourself out! He whispers. You bear My own image, and you are deeply loved. It's who you are. It's why you matter.

Through our words and our lives, we as parents can demonstrate that we wholeheartedly choose to have every affection and identity submit to Jesus as King. Ideally, in our kids, that means they first allow Jesus as both Savior and Master. Yes, their race and gender and interests matter! But they all bow down to Jesus. That identity is better and more fulfilling than aimlessly experimenting with the smorgasbord of available identities.

I feel lonely. If I try to talk to my friends about deeper things, will they think I'm weird?

In the past decade, loneliness in teens has more than doubled worldwide.¹⁴ Though it is difficult to untangle the precise causes of this, internet use, overcrowded schedules, and social media all seem to contribute heavily to rising levels of loneliness.

Whatever the causes, teens are struggling to connect with each other and these new social norms exacerbate the issue. Your teen may need help, especially when it comes to face-to-face connection with his peers. Youth group, sports teams, and school clubs can encourage healthy peer connection, but remember to encourage your teen's attempts or opportunities to spend time with friends—and that vulnerability breeds

¹⁴ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1016/j.adolescence.2021.06.006>

vulnerability. If your teen can courageously set the norm for authentic, deep discussion, others may respond in kind and feel secure to find help when they need it most.

Why aren't more grownups upfront about sex?

Teens often feel confused and frustrated by adults' reticence to talk about sex. Too many parents outsource conversations about dating and sex to schools or churches, while teachers, youth leaders, and mentors often defer to parents. This dynamic, void of information and discussion, leaving kids underinformed and vulnerable.

Despite the assumption your teen doesn't want to hear their mom or dad talk about sex, your teen wants to know more about sex. They deeply need good information, loving connection, and helpful advice in conversations about sex, dating, and sexual identity.

Does not having the perfect body mean that I'm unhealthy?

Male or female, your teen is bombarded by images of photoshopped, curated, or filtered bodies, often in the context of conversations about health and self-care. It will be difficult to untangle these mixed messages, often associating attractiveness, masculinity, exercise, or weight with health. Modeling balanced nutrition; moderate, regular exercise; an active lifestyle; and good sleep habits—disconnected from conversations about weight loss or gain, muscularity, or physical appearance—can help them conceptualize healthy living and the natural variety among human bodies.



What you may be curious about:

You and your teen's questions on this topic can be endless, but we wanted to bring up a few we've heard often. Short paragraphs likely aren't enough. Still, we hope to offer some perspective to get you started.

How do I handle worry and anxiety about my teen?

As a parent, your love and concern for your child often translates into deep fears and worries about your teen's wellbeing. These fears don't seem unwarranted—there's a lot of bad news circulating about mental health, influence of social media, loneliness, sexual identity, academic pressures, racism, and sexual violence among teens.

When fears and worries start to overwhelm you, don't think of your child as a statistic or a passive victim of the culture. You know your child—or if you feel like you don't, take the next step of leaning in. You love your child, and you can use that knowledge and love to engage in meaningful ways that help them navigate their own particular issues and weaknesses.

Remember that a person's story is long—and looking anywhere in the Bible, we see our God is a God of the long game. Your teen will go through many different phases and seasons in their life, overseen by a God passionate about going after even one lost person (Luke 15). He promises generous wisdom to anyone who asks (James 1:5-6).

If your hopes and dreams rest on your child, both of you will crumble under the pressure. Your child wasn't meant to sustain the weight of your significance or worth: You will need something outside of yourself, outside of your child, you can relentlessly depend on. Scripture encourages us to think of God as our "Heavenly Father" ([Psalm 103:13](#); [Matthew 6:9-13](#)); just as you know and love your child, God profoundly knows and fervently loves you. But unlike you, he also has the power to truly help you in all the ways that really matter ([Psalm 46:1](#), [Ephesians 2:4-5](#)). He has promised to never leave your side ([Matthew 28:19-20](#); [Isaiah 49:15-16](#)). [First Peter 5:7](#) reminds us, "Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you."

How can I protect my teen from such a destructive world?

When your child was a baby, it was vitally important that you protected and shielded your child, sometimes literally carrying them through the day. But as your child grows up, one of your primary roles will be to gradually widen that protective circle.

In the teen years, your focus should gradually shift from protecting your teen and wielding authority to preparing your teen for life in the real world, coaching them to make their own wise decisions.

Begin to talk much more openly and freely about sex and sexual issues. Don't hurry them out of the room if adults begin serious discussions of sexual issues. Let them hear what a healthy discussion of ideas sounds like.

News stories about sex trafficking, abortion, hate crimes, LGBTQ issues, or sexual violence can prompt nuanced and complex conversations that help your teen think seriously and for themselves about sexuality. Work hard to maintain a shame-free and gracious environment during these talks, with a goal of keeping your teen talking to you—and being a conversation starter rather than a conversation stopper.

Why isn't my teenager hanging out with friends as often as I did?

Social interactions among teens have shifted dramatically in the past decade. Jean Twenge, author of *Generations*, states that, "Compared with teenagers in previous decades, iGen teens are less likely to get together with their friends. They're also less likely to go to parties, go out with friends, date, ride in cars for fun, go to shopping malls or go to the movies."¹⁵

Loneliness has doubled worldwide¹⁶ and sexual activity among teens is lower than it has been in decades.¹⁷ Technology and the advent of the smartphone, heavy academic and extracurricular activities, and a slower-motion process of growing up have all contributed to these changes, most of which have had an extremely negative impact on the wellbeing of teens and have been outside of their control.

Consider ways of facilitating and encouraging your teen's engagement in face-to-face interactions with friends, while also showing empathy and understanding as your teen may be struggling with genuine loneliness.

How am I supposed to talk to my teen about dating and sex when they always push me away?

Child therapist and author Sissy Goff comments on teens' penchant to send mixed signals: "Come close. Get away!"¹⁸ (For example, "Why aren't you talking to me about sex? Gross, why are you talking to me about sex?!")

It's painful and frustrating, no? A good place to start is to just...listen. Become a "teen scientist" by getting curious. Ask your teen and your teen's friends lots of open questions. The more you listen without judgment and with genuine interest and compassion, the more you'll build trust with your teen.

"What are some things most people your age think about sexuality?"

"What do you believe now about sexuality that you didn't believe before?"

"What's confusing or frustrating to you when it comes to these issues?"

¹⁵ https://www.salon.com/2019/03/24/teens-have-less-face-time-with-their-friends-and-are-lonelier-than-ever_partner/

¹⁶ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1016/j.adolescence.2021.06.006>

¹⁷ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-08-03/young-adults-less-sex-gen-z-millennials-generations-parents-grandparents>

¹⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CuQLtJPAXhL/?igshid=MTC4MmM1Yml2Ng==>