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## Your kids actually want you to talk to them about sex

When Avital Norman Nathman's son was about 3, she says, he freaked out after he walked in on her changing a sanitary pad. So she decided to have an age-appropriate conversation about menstruation with him right then and there. She has taken an open approach ever since with her son, now 10, when it comes to talking about sex.

"It's not just one conversation," said [Norman Nathman](#), of Northhampton, Massachusetts, a blogger and editor of an anthology on motherhood titled "[The Good Mother Myth: Redefining Motherhood to Fit Reality.](#)" "We have this idea in our heads that there is 'the talk,' but it shouldn't be just one conversation. It should be multiple conversations, and starting from a pretty young age."

Norman Nathman's approach is influenced by what she observed when she taught high school for about four years, beginning in 2002. With sex ed as part of the curriculum, she often led discussion groups based on what the students heard from experts on sex education.

And she was surprised by "the amount of people that would come in from the overall talk with, 'Oh, my gosh. I didn't realize these things.' "

For instance, a lot of them thought they could get pregnant simply by being in a hot tub, she said.

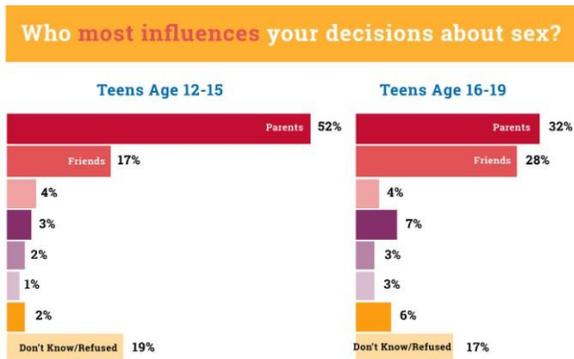
"Talk to your kids," she said when I asked her advice for other parents. "Be there to answer questions, because as uncomfortable as it may be for you, it might be more uncomfortable when your kid comes to you with (a sexually transmitted infection) or with an unplanned pregnancy."

Parents might dread talking to their kids about sex, but here's something really important for every parent to realize: They have tremendous power. Consistently, in surveys conducted by the [National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy](#), teens have said parents have the most influence over their decisions about sex. In [the most recent survey, released in October](#), 52% of children ages 12 to 15 said their parents have the most influence when it comes to sex, with friends far behind at 17%. For the 16 to 19 age group, 32% of teens say their parents carry the most weight, with 28% saying their friends have the most influence.

However, when parents are asked who they think most influences their teens' decisions about sex, friends come out far on top. Nearly 60% of more than 2,000 adults over 18 surveyed nationally said friends carry the most

weight, in findings released exclusively to CNN, while just 11% said that parents were the biggest influencers.

"It's a natural rite of passage for teens to act like adults don't matter. It's just part of the developmental process in many, many cases, so I think it's fair for adults to believe what their teens are telling them, and the reality is that teens are clearly saying, especially younger teens and even 16- to 19-year-olds, their parents absolutely matter," said Ginny Ehrlich, chief executive officer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.



Even though Janeane Davis, a suburban Philadelphia mom of four, has been talking to her kids about sex since they were young, she still finds it surprising that teens say their parents have the most power when it comes to their decisions about sex.

"I expected that in my house, but I didn't expect that to be true across the country, and so that's kind of encouraging to know that as parents, we can still influence our children," said Davis, whose kids are 9, 14 and 21 and who blogs at [Janeane's World](#).

We need to talk to our children, she said, and give them our opinions, "because they're going

to listen to what we say, even if they don't do what we want. At least they're listening."

But parents seem skeptical about their own abilities to be a trusted source for their children or other young people when it comes to topics such as sex, birth control and relationships, according to the survey.

While 68% said they consider themselves someone whom a younger person could approach to discuss these sensitive issues, 32% said they either couldn't be that person or didn't know whether they could play that role, according to the findings to be released this week.

"We know that parents are key influencers ... and parents might not believe that, but what they should remember is that this is part of a process and that what parents instill in young people ... might not take hold and catch hold at the moment, but they're preparing their young people, their kids, for the future," Ehrlich said.

Research shows that young people who believe there is an adult they can talk with and trust are less likely to have a teen pregnancy, she said.

So how can parents start and have these important conversations with their kids? First, they should realize that the conversation is as hard for the teen as it is for the adult, Ehrlich said. "So many sitcoms have really covered that. As soon as the adult brings it up, the teen goes, 'Oh, no!' and vice versa: As soon as the teen brings it up, the adult is like, 'Oh, no!'"

The key is for both teen and parent to realize that it's uncomfortable and that it's OK to feel uncomfortable, she added.

Here are some tips to start the conversation and keep it going.

## 1. Talking about sex in the digital age

Diana Graber, who teaches "[Cyber Civics](#)" to middle schoolers in Aliso Viejo, California, remembers the first time she talked to her older daughter about sex. It was probably pre-middle school when she learned from another parent that she had had "the talk" with her son. Graber, a mom of two, then felt like she needed to have a conversation with her daughter because she didn't want her to be left behind.

"And so I did, and she was looking at me: 'Why are you telling me this? I don't want to know any of this,'" recounted Graber, co-founder of [CyberWise.org](#), a digital media literacy platform for tweens and teens, teachers and parents. "For years after, even now today, she is 21 years old, she said, 'You told me that stuff way too young.' But as a parent, you just don't know. You don't want to be the one that their kid finds out from their friends because you were too lame to have that conversation."

Her daughter grew up before kids had cellphones in their hands, she said. "I feel like it's so different for parents today because they don't have that opportunity to break the news to them."

Graber says her sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders are often seeing a lot of sexual imagery that's sometimes confusing to them. A widely touted statistic is that [70% of children between 7 and 18 have stumbled upon pornography accidentally](#).

She advises parents who give young kids devices to make sure parental controls are in place to keep them from seeing inappropriate content and to spend time on the social media networks their kids are on.

She says social media can actually open a door to have discussions about sex that parents wouldn't know how to bring up before.



"If something inappropriate happens and you know about it, well, that's a great door opener to talk about it and to be that wisdom and kind of guide them through what they're seeing," Graber said. "That's the thing about technology and social media. It does give you a window into your child's world that we never had before. When I was having conversations at the corner with friends, my parents weren't listening."

Ehrlich, of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, said parents should keep in mind how more and more conversations about sex are happening via text. Talking about sex with our kids through texts might be uncomfortable for those of us who didn't grow up in the digital age and prefer face-to-face chats, but texting might help break the ice and then make the face-to-face conversation easier, she said.

"I think there may be something ... in being askable and making sure the door is open for conversation," Ehrlich said. "I think that for some young people, probably, the knowledge that the door is open is more important than the conversation itself."

## 2. How pop culture can get the conversation going

More than half of young people ages 12 to 24 have had a helpful conversation with their parents about sex because of something they saw in popular media, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

"I think watching things in media ... can be a great conversation starter," Ehrlich said. Parents can then use those moments as opportunities to talk about what happened, ask their child what they thought and talk about how it's similar or different to what they believe and do as a family.

Davis, the mom of four, uses this approach quite a bit with her children. "If we see something on a television show, we'll do something along the lines of, 'Why is she making out with him? She just said she doesn't like him.' "

Having regular conversations and making them part of their everyday lives is a much better approach, she believes, than having one big talk.

"We try to look for ways to make it part of life, because if it's part of life, they're more likely to listen when we talk than if it's 'Oh, my God, we got to have that conversation again,' " she said. "If we keep it along those lines, we think or we're hoping that we'll have better results than if it's just this major once a year conversation."

## 3. Practice, practice, practice

The old adage "practice makes perfect" applies to talking about sex with your kids, Ehrlich said.



Sex talk with mom 02:11

"How do we practice for these conversations, knowing that developmentally, they're probably going to come, so how do we think about how we're going to prepare ourselves as adults not to react in a way that isn't going to keep the door open?" she asked.

That means thinking about what you might say and what resources you might want to offer to your child, because adults don't need to be experts in everything, she added. We have plenty of resources on the Internet, so that takes some of the pressure off. We just need to think beforehand about which trusted resources would be good for our kids to utilize on their own time.

## 4. 'Stay early and stay late'

Ehrlich says "stay early and stay late" is an expression one of her colleagues likes to use. What it means is, there is no such thing as "the talk" -- but rather many talks that parents should be having with their children as they grow.

Also, the conversation doesn't need to be about technicalities and specifics, she said. It's more about making sure your children know that they have the power to decide when and if to have sex and what you as parents feel about that as a family.

"Here's kind of what our teachings tell us about it. Here's what we want to think about," she said, sharing examples of what parents might say. "These are all kinds of guidance conversations that really parlay into the future and what (could happen) in the future."

## **5. Be open**

Davis says her and her husband's philosophy has always been that kids are going to do what they want to do, and so they've been open with their children about sex and birth control.

"They're not necessarily going to listen to us and just wait until you're married," Davis said. "And if they're not going to do that, we want them to be protected."

Her husband has made the point with their 14-year-old son that just like a cellphone has a case, he needs to "keep it covered" if he's going to have sex.

"We figure, if we talk to them and we're open and honest, then they're more likely to do the right thing and not be afraid to tell us what they've done and what they plan to do."

Norman Nathman, the mom of one and editor of "The Good Mother Myth," says people might think that if you talk to kids about sex and teach them about it, they're more likely to have sex.

"But they are going to have sex regardless. Why don't we give them the tools to do it safely for themselves and their partners?"