

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

WHAT STAYS WITH TEENS: INSIGHTS FOR PARENTS ON SEX TALKS

Researchers Dr. Amanda Holman and Dr. Jody Koenig Kellas asked nearly 400 teens (ages 16-19) to share stories about the most memorable conversation they had with parents about sex-related topics - and what they wish (if anything) had gone differently. Here's what they found.

WHAT TEENS REMEMBER PARENTS SAYING

Teens' most memorable conversations about sex-related topics fell into 6 main themes:

- **Underdeveloped** - conversation that were seen as too basic or vague in discussing a sex-related topic. Conversations were often short and underdeveloped in helping a teen make sense of sexual information.
- **Safety** - conversations that focused on being safe, cautious, and careful to avoid sexually transmitted infections (STI) or pregnancy. These conversations focused on general sexual safety and importance of protection (e.g., contraception).
- **Comprehensive** - conversations that covered multiple topics related to sexual health and relationships. These conversations included physical, emotional, and relational aspects of engaging in sexual activity.
- **Warning/Threat** - conversations that focused on messages of warning, danger, and threat when talking about engaging in sexual activities.
- **Wait** - conversations characterized by parents urging them to wait to have sex until they were in adulthood, married and/or with the "right" person.
- **No Talk** - when teens noted their parents never had a direct conversation with them about any sex-related topic.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PARENTS

- ♥ Start early and talk often. Normalize conversations about sex-related topics in your home.
- ♥ Say something instead of nothing. Even if it's a little awkward, teens value when parents care.
- ♥ Talk about not only the physical aspects of sexual activity, but the relational and emotional implications. "Comprehensive talks" were rated the most effective - especially when parents covered safety, relationships, and emotions.
- ♥ Make it a two-way conversation. Listen, ask questions, and avoid lecturing.
- ♥ Stories stick. Personal experiences (shared thoughtfully) make conversations memorable.

WHAT TEENS WISH PARENTS HAD DONE DIFFERENTLY

When asked how these conversations could have been improved, these themes emerged:

- **Be more specific and give real guidance** - give details on puberty, consent, relationships expectations, and contraception.
- **"Just talk to me"** - don't be afraid to talk with them. It may be uncomfortable or weird, but they want their parents to care about their relational health.
- **Be appropriate** - choose the right time, place, and manage emotions
- **Collaborate** - listen, ask questions, and encourage dialogue over lectures
- **No change** - mentioned when parents provided comprehensive and thoughtful information.



FULL STUDY

Holman, A. & Koenig Kellas, J. (2018). How adolescents perceive their parents' real and ideal conversations about sex: Toward reducing adolescent sexual risk. *Communication Monographs*, 85, 357-379.