

Conversation Starters

Many families belong to religious denominations, while others have a strong sense of spirituality without belonging to an organized faith community. Still others talk about values and beliefs without discussing religion or spirituality at all. Whatever relationship you have with religion, it's important that you talk with your young person about sexuality in the context of your own personal, moral views. Most faith traditions talk about sexuality as a gift of God – as something to be respected and in which to find joy.

How to Discuss

While it does take some preparation, parents/caregivers can provide accurate information about sexuality, and reinforce their spiritual or religious values. Here are some tips to consider when doing so:

- Before you speak with your young person about sexuality, think about what your values are. What do you believe? What does your faith tradition say? It is important to give your young person factual information and to be very specific.
- Sometimes, factual information can challenge a belief or what a faith community believes. This can provide an opportunity to make sure that youth have accurate information and hear what your values are relating to it. It also provides an opportunity to explain that there are different beliefs in the community, that people are allowed to disagree with each other, and that differing views should be respected as long as those views are based on ethics, responsibility, justice, equality and nonviolence.
- Practice what you preach, but don't preach. Some common values about sexuality and relationships that most people support include honesty, equality, responsibility and respect for differences. Acting on your values and being a good role model are powerful messages for youth. On the other hand, your beliefs will not seem very important or valuable to your young person if they don't see you respect and abide by them yourself. Make sure to have a conversation with your young person, don't talk at them. Find out what they think and how they feel about sexuality and relationships. Then you will be able to share information and respond to questions effectively.
- All young people deserve to be wanted and loved, and caregivers can reinforce this message. Let them know you are interested in what they think and how they feel about any topic, whether it is sexuality, school, religion, the future or whatever. When youth share feelings with you, praise them for it. Correct misinformation gently, and reinforce your values whenever possible.
- Too often, caregivers think they need to wait until they collect enough information and energy to be prepared to have "the talk" with their young person. However, sexuality is a part of every person's life from the moment they are born. It is important to start the conversation early and to make it clear to your young person that you are always willing to talk about sexuality.
- Keep your sense of humor. Sexuality, in most of its aspects, can be a joyful topic for discussion in the family.²⁰