



talking

with your **teenager**
about relationships and
sexual wellbeing

For parents and carers

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Contents

Who is this booklet for?	2
Why talk with your teenager about relationships and sexual wellbeing?	4
What is my role as the parent/carer?	6
When should I start talking about relationships and sexual wellbeing?	7
Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education	10
How could I answer questions?	12
Suggested questions and answers	16
Where can I get more information and support?	60

Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is aimed at parents and carers of teenagers aged 11+, to help support them in talking about relationships and sexual wellbeing. It may also be useful for parents of older teenagers and other family members.

Everyone in Scotland should have the opportunity to have positive and respectful relationships and talking is a great place to start.

Start at an early age but keep it simple – keeping these chats going means you can give them more details as they get older. You don't have to read this booklet all at once, but it may give you some useful starting points if you have not started to speak about relationships and sexual wellbeing with your teenager. Even if you have, it might help you build on what you have already discussed.

It has not been possible to provide detailed information to support parents and carers of teenagers with disabilities, but we have signposted to appropriate support in the information and support section (pages 60–61).

What is sexual wellbeing?

Sexual wellbeing is a good balance of emotional, physical and social wellness relating to sexual health and is linked to your overall general health.

Why talk with your teenager about relationships and sexual wellbeing?

Teenagers are exposed to this topic through the internet, gaming, magazines, music videos and TV, often getting inappropriate and misleading information. Talking with, and educating, teenagers about relationships and sexual wellbeing can help them:

- develop communication skills to help them build strong relationships in which they feel comfortable
- explore their feelings and emotions as part of developing relationships and learn to respect others
- delay having sex until they are ready
- resist pressure from other teenagers and the media to have sex

- develop the confidence and knowledge to make positive choices about sex, including the choice not to have sex
- negotiate with their partner what they do, and do not, feel comfortable with
- agree to have safer sex with their partner if they do decide to have sex.

Teenagers discuss relationships and sex with their friends, but the information they get may not be accurate. By talking to your teenager about these issues yourself, you can be sure that they get the information that you think is important – and that you know is correct.

What is my role as the parent/carer?

Teenagers should receive Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education throughout their whole school life. The role of parents and carers is to be open to discussion of teenagers' questions at home.

Teenagers need encouragement to explore their feelings and appreciate the emotional side of relationships. They need to be able to make positive choices, have accurate information about how to get the best from sexual relationships and avoid potential pitfalls, including the risk of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). As well as practical advice, teenagers also need encouragement to explore their feelings and appreciate the emotional side of relationships.

When should I start talking about relationships and sexual wellbeing?

Talking about growing up, relationships and sexual wellbeing is not a one-off event, but a gradual process, starting when a child is small and continuing until they are adults. But don't worry if you didn't begin talking to them about relationships and sexual wellbeing when they were younger – it's never too late.

Many parents/carers worry that their teenager no longer confides in them and that they won't come to them for advice about relationships and sex. There may be a number of reasons for this. Teenagers may be holding back because they:

- feel too embarrassed to ask
- are aware of your embarrassment
- realise that sex or relationships are never discussed in the family
- feel that the language that you or they use to talk about sex is inappropriate
- think that, if they raise it, you will think they are having sex
- think that they already know everything there is to know
- want to be independent and find out about sex from other sources.

If you want to talk about relationships and sexual wellbeing with your teenager, but are worried that they won't want to, you could try raising the subject in one of the following ways:

- **Using everyday opportunities, like after a TV programme or film.**
- **Using a magazine as a prompt.**
- **Leaving booklets or books (about teenagers' sexual health services) lying around to give them accurate local information.**
- **Discussing information on the internet.**
- **Asking about what they are learning about in school.**

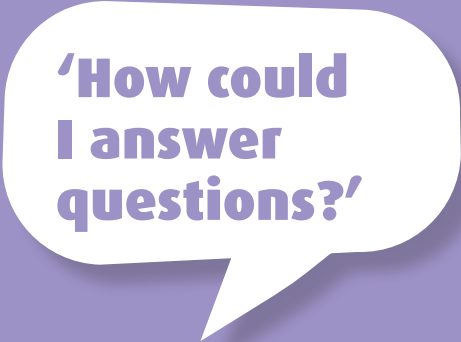
Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education

In addition to what they learn at school, teenagers still need the opportunity to talk to you as their parent/carer about relationships and sexual wellbeing. RSHP education is taught as part of the Health and Wellbeing experiences and outcomes for Curriculum for Excellence. The way this is delivered varies from school to school.

The Scottish Government has provided guidance for local authorities, schools and parents. This guidance states that RSHP education should present the facts in an unbiased, balanced and sensitive way within a framework of sound values. Curriculum for Excellence says that schools should engage with parents in their children's learning and the life of the school. This includes keeping parents/carers informed and consulted about what is being taught

during each year. As a parent, if you have any questions about the RSHP education the school is providing, the first thing to do is to discuss them with your teenager's teacher.

For more information on Relationships, Sexual health and Parenthood education, please visit Parentzone:
www.educationscotland.gov.uk/parentzone/




**'How could
I answer
questions?'**

This booklet does not give you all the answers – there are no right or perfect answers (or questions) and only you will know the most appropriate response to questions from your son or daughter. Here are some tips to help you answer challenging questions. Following that, there are some example questions and answers.



Take a moment

Don't feel like you need to answer straight away. If it's not a good time, say so, but remember to go back to answer the question later.



Answer the question with another question, e.g. 'That's interesting, what makes you ask that?'

This is a way both to buy some time and also to find out the reasons or context behind the question.



Keep to the question

Give them enough information to answer the question, but avoid an overload of information. Your teenager will ask for more if they want it.



Be honest

Don't make up an answer if you are unsure. It's okay to say 'I don't know, but I'll find out for you, or we could find out together'.

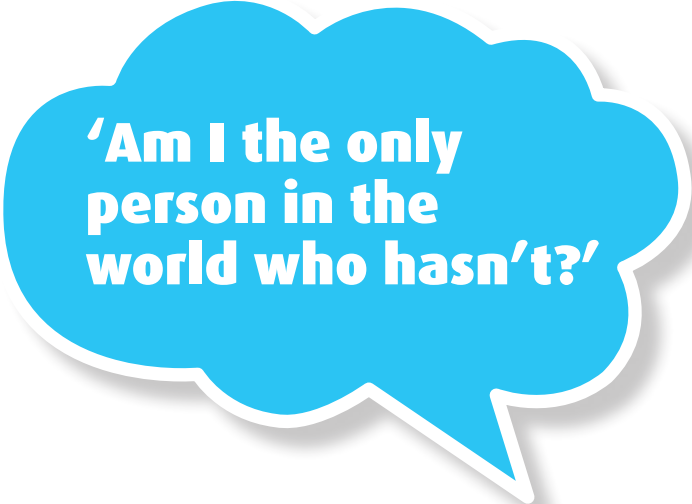
Remember:

- Many of the scenarios come from parents themselves – they won't all apply to your situation.
- It is impossible to prepare for every question.
- The answer you give will depend on their age and stage of development.
- The question your teenager asks may not be the one you are expecting. They may also 'test the water' by asking a slightly different question first. Listen and find out more before you answer.

Tone and body language

- Your own sex life is private. You do not have to answer questions about it. Being too open can be as disturbing for children as not being open enough.
- Engage with the school to keep informed of what is being taught – this may help predict/prepare for any questions that come up.
- Ask your health visitor, school nurse or school for ideas and help on answering questions.

Your 13-year-old son tells you that all the guys in his class say they've already had sex.



'Am I the only person in the world who hasn't?'

question

1

Feedback from teenagers tells us that most of them don't have sex before they are 16. So it's highly unlikely that your son is the only person in his class who hasn't yet had sex. This may reassure him that his experience is quite normal. Explain that peer pressure can lead teenagers to embellish their sex lives – or invent them entirely if they are non-existent.

Your son shouldn't feel rushed to have sex when he's not ready, and certainly not just to 'keep up' with his mates or save face. Choosing to wait until he is older or is in a mature, loving relationship can be a positive choice.

“ You’re unlikely to be the only guy in your class who is a virgin. Some people like to brag about having sex and others make things up because they don’t want to feel like the odd one out. Don’t feel pressured into having sex, especially not by your mates.

Ignore their questions or tell them that you don’t feel the need to discuss your sex life. They don’t need to know all the details if you don’t want them to. ”

“ The people who brag most loudly about having sex are probably just trying to hide the fact that they haven’t done it. Choosing whether or not to have sex is a very personal decision and ‘keeping up’ with your friends shouldn’t come into it.

If you feel under pressure when friends ask about your experience, just say to them ‘Don’t worry about me. I’m having a great time – I just don’t need to tell the world about it’. ”

Your 14-year-old daughter hasn't been herself for several days. After much coaxing, she eventually confides in you:

'My boyfriend wants me to go on the pill but I don't know if I want to. What should I do?'

**For more information, visit
Young Scot**

question

2

Learn to read between the lines. Your daughter's concerns may not be about taking the pill itself, but about one of a range of other issues. Perhaps she is feeling under pressure to have sex, or maybe her boyfriend wants her to go on the pill because he doesn't want to use condoms.

Try to broaden the conversation. Even if she doesn't want to discuss this further with you, your daughter will at least think about whether there are other concerns she has about her boyfriend's request (for example doing something she doesn't want to do).

It's also illegal for children under 16 to have sexual intercourse so you might want to discuss this with her too.

The pill is only one contraceptive option and it might not be suitable for your daughter, so as well as talking to you, encourage her to discuss other contraceptive options with her GP, sexual health services or with staff at your local youth friendly drop-in centres.

- “ Why do you think he wants you to go on the pill? If you are both thinking about sex, you both need to feel ready – if one of you is a bit unsure maybe it’s best to wait? ”
- “ If you decide that you want to start having sex, the pill can be a good way to prevent pregnancy. To make sure that you keep yourself safe from infection, you also have to use a condom. You need to feel comfortable discussing these things with your partner. You might decide to wait until you are older and that’s okay. ”

**For more information, visit
Young Scot**

- “ The pill can be an effective way to prevent an unintended pregnancy, but it should be used with condoms, not instead of them, because it doesn't prevent STIs. Thinking about contraception and protection before beginning a sexual relationship is a really good thing. ”
- “ But only you can decide if you are ready for that step. If you're not 100% sure, then it is okay to say 'no' as it might mean that you're not ready. ”

After watching a film that includes a gay character, your 11-year-old son asks:

'How do people know that they're gay?'

Such a question may simply mean that your son is curious, or it could indicate that he has feelings he is confused about himself. Bearing this in mind, be as open and positive as possible when answering his question.

**For more information, visit
LGBT Youth**

question

3

- People often question their sexuality when they're growing up. It's quite common for teenagers to have a crush on someone of the same sex, but it doesn't always mean they're gay, any more than having a crush on someone of the opposite sex means you're straight. »

- “ Sometimes these feelings simply stem from admiration and lessen with time, and sometimes they can be a sign of sexual orientation. Talking things through can sometimes help people who are feeling confused. ”
- “ Some people know from a very young age that they are gay, others discover later in life, often when they start to have romantic relationships. No one can tell you whether you're gay, straight or bisexual – it's something you feel inside. ”

“ For people who are confused about their feelings, it can help to talk to someone who has been through the same experience. There are lots of helplines and websites set up to offer support. ”

Your 11-year-old son's girlfriend hasn't phoned him for more than a week. When you gently ask him if everything's okay, he admits that she broke up with him.

'What's wrong with me? Why doesn't she want to go out with me any more?'

**For more information, visit
Sexual Health Scotland**

question

4

Try to remember what it was like when you went through your first break-up. When you're younger, it's easy to assume that it's your 'fault' when a relationship ends. Your first relationship can really boost your ego, so when it ends your confidence can be shattered. Everyone feels bad about themselves following a split – let him know that this is not something unusual. Tell your son that what he is feeling is normal and will pass. Explain that you have been through the same experience and that he will feel better in time. At the same time, try to show him how special he is, perhaps by reminding him of all the great friends he has who care about him.

Nothing is wrong with you. People often break up because their feelings change over time or they simply grow apart. It's very upsetting to split up with someone you care so much about, but each relationship also helps you find out more about who you are and what you want from a partner.

Remember all the good qualities you have that made your girlfriend want to go out with you in the first place. You had lots of great times together, but it's very difficult to find a partner who is the perfect match. That's why most people don't settle down until they are in their twenties or thirties and some people never settle down with a partner. Try to enjoy more time with your friends just now and look forward to enjoying a relationship with a new person in the future.

Your 13-year old daughter and her friend are discussing an older friend who has taken the 'morning after' pill.



'Does it only work the day after having sex?'

question

5

This confusion arises because emergency contraception is often mistakenly called the 'morning after' pill. Emergency contraception can be taken by a woman up to 72 hours (around three days, some pills can work up to five days) after having sex without using a condom, or if the condom splits.

Emergency contraception is available from pharmacies, GP and sexual health services. It's important that you are clear about contraception so that your daughter can make informed choices about how to prevent unintended pregnancy if she does decide to have sex. Teenagers should know that emergency contraception is available, and can be effective in preventing unintended pregnancy, but that it isn't a regular and reliable form of contraception.

It's also vital to stress that emergency contraception offers no protection against STIs. You may also have a particular view about emergency contraception which you may want to share with your daughter.

“ A woman can take emergency contraception up to 72–120 hours after having sex, but it's more effective the sooner it's taken. It can prevent an unintended pregnancy if a couple's usual method of contraception hasn't worked. But it doesn't protect against STIs. Using a condom can help do that. ”

Emergency contraception can be taken within three days of having unprotected sex, though it works best if you take it within 24 hours. It's no substitute for using a condom, though, as it doesn't protect against infection. GPs, and places like local sexual health services, can give out emergency contraception for free. You can also buy it from pharmacies if it is not provided free of charge.

On the way home from school, your 12-year-old daughter tells you that some older kids were laughing at one of her classmates because he had had a wet dream.



'Does that mean that he wet the bed?'

she asks.

question

6

It's important that you explain to girls what boys go through at puberty, and vice versa, so that teenagers grow up with a good understanding of the opposite sex. Knowing that other boys and girls have their own issues to cope with during puberty can make a young person less self-conscious about the changes that they are going through themselves.

“ No. A wet dream is when some of a boy’s sperm is released when he is sleeping. Wet dreams and unexpected erections are part and parcel of growing up for a boy, and aren’t anything to be ashamed of, or teased about.”

“ No, he didn’t wet the bed. When a boy reaches puberty, often between the ages of 10 and 13, he begins producing sperm. A wet dream is when a boy releases some of that sperm – or ejaculates – while he is asleep. It’s completely normal, and boys don’t have any control over it. Nobody should tease your friend about it. ”

Your 11-year-old son is reading the newspaper and comes across the term 'safer sex'.

'Does that just mean having sex with a condom?'

question

7

Using a condom when having sex is one way to avoid becoming pregnant or getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI), including HIV. But your teenager should know that 'sex' doesn't just mean penetrative sex and that there are other ways people can enjoy being intimate with one another.

‘Safer sex’ means always using a condom, no matter what kind of sexual activity is involved. It’s called ‘safer’ sex rather than ‘safe’ sex as even sex with a condom involves some risk. Kissing, massage and touching each other, are ‘safe’ sexual activities, as the risk of infection is rare.

‘ Yes, ‘safer sex’ does mean using a condom when having sex, to reduce the risk of getting HIV or other STIs. But having sex doesn’t always involve sexual intercourse. People also enjoy stroking and touching each other which are all classed as ‘safe sex’ because they don’t involve the exchange of bodily fluids. ’



**'What's an STI
and how do
you get one?'**

**asks your 12-year
old son, after flicking
through a magazine
at the dentist's
surgery.**

question

8

A sexually transmitted infection (or STI) is an infection that both men and women can get, and pass on, from sexual activity. These include HIV, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, syphilis, genital herpes and genital warts. Using condoms can reduce the risk of getting these. It is important for all teenagers to know that STIs exist and that many may not have any symptoms so you don't know if you have been infected or not.

Condoms are used not just as a contraceptive, but also to protect against infections, including HIV. Having sex without taking precautions not only puts you at risk of having an unintended pregnancy, but can also have longer-term health implications, such as infertility, which you might not find out about for many years.

STI stands for sexually transmitted infection. That means that it's an infection that you can get or pass on by having sex. There are lots of different kinds of STIs, most of which can be cured; some cannot be cured. People can reduce the risk of getting most STIs by having safer sex, which means always using a condom. »

“ An STI is a sexually transmitted infection – an infection that can be passed between sexual partners (boy/girl, girl/boy, girl/girl or boy/boy). Some STIs have symptoms, but others go unnoticed. STIs are preventable, so it’s important to avoid them in the first place by using a condom. Condoms can help you avoid STIs. Apart from totally avoiding any form of sexual contact, no other type of contraception can do this. ”



'I thought girls usually got their periods by my age. Why haven't mine started?'

asks your 13-year-old daughter.

question

9

Everyone develops at different rates, and puberty is no exception. Let your daughter know that she is by no means the only 13-year-old girl to have not had a period yet. In fact, puberty may begin for boys and girls at any age between 8 and 18. But if you or your daughter are concerned about her absence of periods, then encourage your daughter to talk to your GP and offer to go with her if she wishes.

‘ It’s OK; you’ve not been left behind. Plenty of girls don’t start their periods until they are 16, or older. You will start yours soon, but in the meantime enjoy not having to think about tampons or pads just yet. ’

Your 12-year-old daughter comments on a soap opera in which an underage girl goes for advice about contraception without discussing it with her parents or getting their consent.



'That's against the law, isn't it?'

question

10

Teenagers often worry that they have no rights to confidentiality when accessing sexual health services, especially if they are under 16. This is not the case. In fact, many services are set up specifically with teenagers in mind.

Make your daughter (or son) aware of the local services available to them, and that they can be used for all sorts of different reasons – from condoms and contraception to counselling. Display booklets from local young people's clinics next to your doctor's details on the noticeboard, and encourage your teenager to look at some of the informative websites listed at the back of this booklet.

Teenagers do not need a parent's permission to go to their GP or sexual health services to get contraception. A young woman also has the right to confidential abortion services. There is no age limit for access to sexual health services, but the health professional concerned will assess the young person's ability to make informed decisions and will always encourage parental involvement/discussion. Having a good relationship with your teenager, including open discussions about sexual health, means that they will be more likely to involve you if and when they need help.

🗨️ No. Young people have the right to privacy when discussing matters with their doctor. You can discuss sexual matters with your GP or a clinic doctor at any age, and they will keep that information confidential (unless they think you are at risk). When you want to get

contraception we don't have to know, but if you want to discuss it with me first, then that would be fine too. It's important that you know where the services are, so that you can be prepared if you decide you're ready to become sexually active. »

- « Contraception and protection can be provided to teenagers without their parents needing to know, even if they are under 16. However, the doctor or nurse must be satisfied that they understand and are not in any danger. Teenagers who are thinking about starting a sexual relationship should visit their doctor or local clinic to make sure they are prepared. »

While sitting out in the sun, your 11-year-old comments:



'I wish I were more muscly'

Sometimes it's easier to think about the 'if only' as a teenager and not stop to appreciate what you do have. Remind them that it's not all about what they look like but also who they are as a person, how they treat others and why their friends like them so much, that matters. Teenagers are more aware of sexual references in the media and therefore it can have a greater effect on their behaviour.

question

11

The media often show the 'perfect' body as 'normal' and this can affect girls' and boys' self-image, self-esteem and body satisfaction. It can also affect their relationships and expectations of potential partners. It's important that teenagers know everyone comes in all shapes and sizes and not to believe everything they see/read/listen to in the media.

- “ Why do you say that? You are handsome the way you are. ”
- “ Do you think people would look at you differently if you had bigger muscles? What do you see as the advantage of that? ”

Coming in from school one day your 12-year-old child asks:

**'Jack says that
sexting is illegal
if you're under 16,
is that true?'**

'Sexting' is sending explicit images via text, email, instant messaging or social networking sites and is becoming more common with the increased use of technology. A survey showed that one in every nine children in Scotland have either sent or received a sexual message online.

**For more information, visit
Childline**

question

12

- ‘ Yes, it is illegal to distribute or show anyone under 18 years an indecent image under Scottish law. Why do you ask; are you worried about someone? ’
- ‘ It’s illegal and can also have other consequences; the image is on the internet forever and is very hard to get rid of it. You and your friends need to think carefully about what you post on the internet. There are always consequences to our actions. ’

You find out that your 13-year-old is watching porn and raise the topic with them.

Pornography is much more accessible today on TV, smartphones, computers and in magazines. It might also be in different formats from what parents have looked at or know about. Although your teenager might not bring this subject up themselves, it is important to speak to them about it to ensure they have a healthy understanding. It can confuse teenagers' perception of what is 'normal' in relation to behaviour and appearance.

“ I know porn is more available to your generation – how do you feel about it? Are there any questions you want to ask me about it? ”

question

13

“ I was reading the paper today and it mentioned how almost a quarter of teenagers in the UK have watched porn. What people forget is that it’s not a true reflection of ‘real’ sex or relationships. I don’t know if you have ever seen or watched it before but I hope you know that it’s your choice to watch it or not, as long as you remember what a healthy relationship is. ”

Where can I get more information and support?

General parenting support:

Parent Network Scotland: **0141 948 0022**,
www.parentnetworkscotland.org.uk

Parentline Scotland: **0800 028 2233**,
www.children1st.org.uk/services/46/parentline-scotland

Parenting Across Scotland:
www.parentingacrossscotland.org/info-for-families.aspx

Parentzone:
www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk

**For parents and carers of children
with learning disabilities:**

Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability,
0141 559 5720, www.sclld.org.uk

This booklet has been produced with support and input from both parents and professionals. Thanks to everyone involved.

Also available:

