



It's time ...to talk about it! Your voice. Our future. Prevent sexual violence.

An overview of adolescent sexual development

Adolescence is a time of growth and discovery. It is a time when young people learn how to have relationships and build the relationship patterns that often carry into adulthood. During this time, many young people also experience sexual violence. Many adults lack accurate information about what to expect as adolescents develop sexually. This can make it difficult to distinguish healthy from unhealthy behaviors. When adults understand the difference between the two, they are better able to support healthy attitudes and behaviors and create positive opportunities to learn from challenges. They also are equipped to intervene when there are concerns related to unhealthy behavior or sexual violence.

Healthy adolescent sexual development and sexual violence prevention

Sexuality is much more than sex – it's our values, attitudes, feelings, interactions, and behaviors. Sexuality is emotional, social, cultural, and physical. Sexual development is one part of sexuality, and it begins much earlier in life than adolescence. By the time we reach adolescence, we already have received many messages about sexuality (Strasburger, 2005). While some adolescents might receive accurate and comprehensive information from school, their parents, and elsewhere, others might receive little information. In the absence of healthy, realistic messages about sexuality, many adolescents turn to other sources of information such as their peers, the internet, and the media (Gruber & Grube, 2000). This might leave youth without an understanding of healthy relationships, consent, boundaries, and how to engage safely in sexual behaviors.

An understanding of healthy sexuality can help

prevent sexual violence by addressing gender norms and inequality, promoting healthy relationships, encouraging an understanding of boundaries and consent, and helping young people feel empowered to ask questions and seek support when they need it.

The goals of promoting the knowledge and skills key to healthy sexuality are to help young people:

- Make decisions that are informed and turn to trusted adults for support and guidance when needed.
- Understand consent and how to respectfully interact with partners, friends, and peers.
- Help influence their peers in a positive manner by promoting positive social norms and engaging in bystander intervention.
- Recognize sexual violence and seek help and support when sexual violence occurs.
- Provide support and information to peers and others who have experienced sexual violence.



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As an adult, it can be easy to forget what it was like to be an adolescent. It can also be easy to view adolescence as a time of upheaval, rather than as a time of opportunity (McNeely & Blanchard, 2009). The following information aims to provide an understanding of adolescent sexual development to help adults to better support youth on their path to becoming healthy

adults (Teipel, n.d.). While the information provides a general guideline for each stage of development, it is important to remember that not all adolescents experience this in the same way. For example, some youth may begin the physical changes of puberty earlier or later than others. A wide variety of experiences are normal and healthy.

EARLY ADOLESCENCE (AGES 10-14)

Early adolescence is a period of change – physically, emotionally and socially. In this stage of development, youth are leaving childhood and beginning to define their identities. While this stage can be challenging for parents and caregivers, remember that this is a time when youth are rapidly gaining new life skills and beginning to develop their value systems. Puberty and physical changes occur during this stage, and this is also a time of emotional and relationship development. Keep in mind that these changes in the body may not happen at the same time or rate as emotional growth.

WHAT'S GOING ON?	COMMON BEHAVIORS/RESPONSES
Puberty brings rapid physical growth and body changes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical changes can create body image issues. This is true for most adolescents, but especially for transgender youth. Might be self-critical or compare themselves to peers. Concern about body/appearance being “normal.”
Getting used to a maturing body and new feelings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased sense of modesty or shyness. Increased need for privacy. Masturbation is common. Concern about feelings/behaviors being “normal.”
Developing a sense of identity and autonomy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Separating themselves from childhood. Increased need for independence. Figuring out “Who Am I?” Peer group socializing is very important and provides opportunity for youth of all genders to interact.



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Parents/caregivers/adults can support the development of healthy sexuality during early adolescence by:

- Providing age-appropriate sexuality information on such topics as puberty, reproduction, healthy relationships, sexual orientation & gender identity, boundaries and body image.
- Helping build critical-thinking skills to separate fact from fiction in media, such as TV, music, video games, pornography, and other depictions of sexuality.
- Starting an open and honest dialogue. Ask questions and, most importantly, listen.

MIDDLE ADOLESCENCE (AGES 15-17)

Middle adolescence is a time of continued physical, social, and emotional change. During middle adolescence, youth are often exploring independence and dating relationships. Parents and caregivers may feel pushed aside, but remember that youth in this stage are completing the important developmental task of establishing themselves as individuals outside of the context of their families.

WHAT'S GOING ON?	COMMON BEHAVIORS/RESPONSES
Continued physical growth and body changes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical changes continue. • Increased interest in being seen as physically and sexually attractive.
Adjusting to a sexually maturing body and feelings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emerging sex drive. • Interest in dating and relationships. • Having feelings of love or desire. This can be exciting, and sometimes stressful, for youth of all orientations.
Continued development of personal identity and independence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wanting parents to be less involved. • Trying out different clothes, friends, and interests in an attempt to find their identity. • Peer groups remain very important.



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Parents/caregivers/adults can support the development of healthy sexuality during middle adolescence by:

- Providing age-appropriate sexuality information on topics such as consent, sexual orientation and gender identity, body image, relationships, pregnancy prevention, and sexually transmitted infections. Being able to refer youth to resources for sexual health care when needed.
- Supporting adolescents in understanding they have both rights and responsibilities in their relationships. Encouraging and modeling characteristics of healthy relationships. Intervening and providing guidance when characteristics of unhealthy relationships and/or sexual violence occur.
- Addressing ways to deal with peer pressure. Encouraging independence while setting clear boundaries.

LATE ADOLESCENCE (AGES 18-21)

Late adolescence is a time when physical and reproductive changes are slowing down. Youth are becoming young adults, often with romantic and sexual relationships. In this final stage of adolescence, youth begin to balance their independence with connections to family and friends. They develop a more firm sense of identity, personal values, and vision of their future.

WHAT'S GOING ON?	COMMON BEHAVIORS/RESPONSES
Physical growth and body changes are ending.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater acceptance of physical self & improved body image.
Formation of a clear sexual identity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Romantic relationships are typically of high importance. • Establishing a sense of who they are in a relationship and what they want. • Sexual activity is common.
Identity continues to develop.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More firm sense of identity, although exploration does continue. • Thinks more about the future. • Decisions and values are based on their own beliefs and less on those of peers.



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Parents/caregivers/adults can support the development of healthy sexuality during late adolescence by:

- Continuing to provide age-appropriate sexuality information on topics such as consent, sexual orientation, and gender identity, body image, relationships, pregnancy prevention, and sexually transmitted infections. Being able to refer youth to resources for sexual health care when needed.
- Continuing messages about rights and responsibilities in relationships. Intervening and providing guidance when characteristics of unhealthy relationships and/or sexual violence occur.
- Encouraging adolescents to be a positive influence on their peers and their community.

Additional Resources

Looking for more information on supporting adolescents on their path to becoming healthy adults? Check out these resources:

Resources for parents & caregivers

Advocates for Youth: Parents' Sex Ed Center
<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/parents-sex-ed-center-home?task=view>

Answer: Resources for Parents
<http://answer.rutgers.edu/page/parentresources>

Office of Adolescent Health: For Parents
<http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-publications/info/parents/index.html>

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
www.pflag.org

Planned Parenthood: Tools for Parents
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/>

Teaching Sexual Health.Ca: Parent Portal
<http://parents.teachingsexualhealth.ca/>

Trans Youth Family Allies: For Parents
<http://www.imatyfa.org/resources/parents/>

Resources for youth-serving professionals

Advocates for Youth: For Professionals
<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/for-professionals>

Answer: Resources for Professionals
<http://answer.rutgers.edu/page/resources>

Center for Adolescent Health at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
<http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-adolescent-health/>

Healthy Sexuality for Sexual Violence Prevention: A report on promising curriculum-based approaches
http://www.communitysolutionsva.org/files/Healthy_Sexuality_ReportFINAL_DRAFT.pdf

Office of Adolescent Health
<http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/>

Planned Parenthood: Tools for Educators
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/resources/>

Teaching Sexual Health.Ca: Teacher's Portal
<http://teachers.teachingsexualhealth.ca/>

Trans Youth Family Allies: For Educators
<http://www.imatyfa.org/resources/educators/>



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References

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