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10 TIPS for Foster Parents

To Help Their Foster Youth Avoid Teen Pregnancy



The good news for parents and other caring adults, including foster parents, is that there is much they can do to help influence their children's decisions about sex.

Foster youth say they want to discuss sex, love, and relationships with their foster parents, but some are embarrassed or feel uncomfortable starting the conversation. The same holds true for foster parents. They often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start. This guide offers some ideas to help foster parents strengthen their relationships with foster youth. It also offers some ideas on how best to communicate about sex, love, and relationships.

Youth in foster care are at greater risk for early pregnancy than teens in general. One study finds that almost one-third of girls in foster care become pregnant at least once by age 17—almost one-half by age 19.¹ Preventing early pregnancy and parenting is important for a number of reasons. Compared to women who delay childbearing, teen mothers are more likely to drop out of school and to live in poverty. Their children are more likely to experience abuse and neglect, enter the child welfare system, be born at low birth weight or mentally retarded, grow up poor, perform poorly in school, and have insufficient health care. Daughters of teen mothers are more likely to become teen parents. Sons of teen mothers are more likely to be incarcerated.

This brochure provides tips on such topics as the importance of maintaining strong, close relationships with children and teens, setting clear expectations for them, and communicating honestly and often with them. Research supports these common sense lessons: not only are they good ideas generally to promote positive youth development, but they can also help teens delay becoming sexually active, as well as encourage those who are having sex to make more responsible choices and use contraception carefully. ■

1 Blaver, L., Courtney, M. (2006). Foster Care Youth, 28. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

TIP # 1

Build a relationship based on trust and compassion.

Some foster youth have had few positive relationships with adults. Many have been moved from home to home, others have experienced abuse and neglect. Let them know early and often that they are welcome in your home, it is safe, and that you care about them. Show them they are important and valued. In other words, do all you can to build a warm, trusting relationship right from the start. Your foster child will feel more comfortable talking to you about a personal topic such as sex, if they feel they can trust you. Understand, too, that a close relationship between caring adults and teens helps young people avoid multiple risky behavior, including early pregnancy and parenthood.

Of special concern: Building strong relationships and talking about sex can be more complex if your foster youth has been sexually abused. They may blame themselves for the abuse. They may have confused feelings about the meaning and purpose of sex. Foster parents, along with a team of case workers and mental health professionals, must work together with the youth to effectively manage anger, teach what is appropriate sexual behavior, and rebuild self esteem and trusting relationships with adults. ■

“Before you have the sex talk, get to know your foster kids better. Don't start talking about it as soon as they enter your house. We (foster youth) build trust with foster parents little by little until we get to the point to where we truly do trust them.” ~ Advice from a foster teen to foster parents

TIP # 2

Talk with your foster children often about sex, and be specific.

Ideally, age-appropriate conversations about relationships and intimacy should begin early in a child's life and continue through adolescence. Even if your foster child enters your house as an older teen, it's never too late to talk to them about sex. All kids need a lot of communication, guidance, and information about these issues, even if they sometimes don't appear to be interested in what you have to say. Resist "the talk" — make it an ongoing conversation. Remember to talk to both your foster daughters and foster sons. Remember too that both foster mothers and foster fathers should be involved in these conversations.

When you start the conversation, make sure that it is honest, open, non-judgmental, and respectful.

Be sure to have a two-way conversation, not a one-way lecture. Ask your teens what *they* think and what they know so you can correct misunderstandings or myths. Ask what worries them. Be a good listener and let your teens talk. Tell them truthfully and confidently what you think and why you think this way. If you're not sure about some issues, tell them that, too.

By the way, research clearly shows that talking with your children about sex does not encourage them to become sexually

"It can't be a one-time conversation, like 'Yeah, I can check that off the list—I had the sex education conversation.' It needs to be an ongoing conversation." ~ Foster father

active. Also keep in mind that your own behavior should match your words. Teens are careful watchers of adults and are very sensitive to hypocrisy.

Don't feel as though you have to "know it all." Teens need help in understanding the meaning of sex, not just how all the body parts work. Tell them about love and sex, and what the difference is. Talk to them about the future and commitment. And remember to talk about the reasons that kids find sex interesting and enticing; discussing only the "downside" of unplanned pregnancy and disease misses many of the issues on teenagers' minds. You will be a better communicator if you are sensitive to your foster youth's culture and religion, as well as their sexual orientation.

Some foster youth have a strong desire to have a child right away. They may seek to create their own family as a source of stable relationships and unconditional love. Have a frank and detailed discussion with your foster teens about how they plan to support a baby through 18 years of life and provide the emotional and financial opportunities they want for their children. Oftentimes, youth do not fully understand the true costs of raising a child. You can help give them a reality check.

Keep your case worker informed about your discussions with your foster youth. He or she can reinforce your messages with the foster youth and support you with any concerns you may have.

Be an askable foster parent. Here are some of the kinds of questions that your foster children may want to discuss:

- How do I know if I'm in love? Will sex bring me closer to my girlfriend/boyfriend?
- How will I know when I'm ready to have sex?
- Will having sex make me popular? How will sex affect my relationships now and in the future?

- How do I tell my boyfriend that I don't want to have sex without losing him or hurting his feelings?
- How do I manage pressure from my girlfriend to have sex?
- How do I deal with pressure from my friends to have sex?
- How does contraception work? Are some methods better than others? Are they safe?
- Can you get pregnant the first time?
- Why should I wait to have a baby?

Be a parent with a point of view. Don't be shy about saying:

- I think sex should be associated with commitment and teens simply aren't ready to commit.
- When you eventually do have sex, always use protection until you are ready to have a child.
- Have a plan. Think in advance about how you'll handle the heat of the moment. Will you say "no"? Will you use contraception? What if your partner wants to have sex but doesn't want to use contraception?
- It's okay to think about sex and feel sexual desire; everybody does. But it doesn't mean you have to act on these feelings now.
- One of the many reasons I'm concerned about drinking and drug use is that they are often linked to bad decisions about sex.
- Having a baby doesn't make you a man. Being strong enough to wait and act responsibly does.
- You don't have to have sex to keep a boyfriend. If sex is the price of a close relationship, then think again about the relationship. ■

TIP # 3

Spend quality time with your foster child.

Teens who are close to their parents/foster parents and feel supported by them are more likely to wait until they are older to begin having sex, have fewer sexual partners, and use contraception more consistently. Simply having a caring parent around can make a real difference.

Family activities such as going out to the movies or outdoor activities can be quite important in a foster child's life. Try to eat and/or cook dinner together as often as possible and use the time for conversation, not confrontation. Something as simple as a car ride can be a perfect time to have meaningful conversations and learn about each other. Be supportive and be interested in what interests them. Attend their sports events; learn about their hobbies; be enthusiastic about their achievements, even the little ones; ask them questions that show you care and want to know what is going on in their lives. ■

"Quality time is the time that child will allow you to have, so make the most of it. It could be an hour or just 10 minutes. Get them to open up and talk to you – build a relationship and friendship with them." ~ Foster mother

TIP # 4

Supervise and monitor your foster children and adolescents.

Do your best to establish rules, curfews, and standards of expected behavior, preferably through open family discussions. This may be difficult since some foster children may try to test your parental limits. Foster youth may contact their birth parents in hopes they will disagree with your rules. However, most foster teens respect guidelines and structure — it shows that you care about them.

If your foster child gets out of school at 3 pm and you don't get home from work until 6 pm, who is responsible for making certain that your foster child is not only safe during those hours, but also involved in positive activities? Where are they when they go out with friends? Are there adults around who are in charge? Supervising and monitoring your foster child's whereabouts doesn't make you a nag; it makes you a caring foster parent. ■

TIP # 5

Know your foster children's friends and their families.

Clearly, friends have a strong influence on each other — both positive and negative. Foster parents should know that there is much they can do to help build on positive peer influence, and help foster teens steer clear of risky friendships. Whenever possible, meet the parents of your foster child's friends so that you can get to know them and try to establish common rules and expectations. It is easier to enforce a curfew that all your foster child's friends share rather than one that makes him or her different — but even if your views don't match those of other parents, hold fast to your convictions. Welcome your foster child's friends into your home and talk to them openly.

Keep in mind that if your foster child has moved around often, she/he may have to make a whole new set of friends. Some foster teens do not want anyone to know they are in foster care and may be reluctant for their foster parents to meet their friends. Don't be discouraged. ■

“I often invite the parents of my foster children's friends over for dinner to get to know the family.” ~ Foster mother

“I drop my foster daughter off at friends' houses and go in and meet the parents.” ~ Foster mother

“My house is the 'hang out.' I have plenty of food around and games for them to play. At times it's inconvenient, but it works. I know that my foster children are safe and it's an opportunity to get to know their friends too.” ~ Foster mother

TIP # 6

Know what your foster kids are watching, reading, and listening to.

Today's teenagers spend over 40 hours *each week* consuming media. Television, music, movies, videos, magazines, and the Internet send many messages about sex: Sex often has no meaning or consequences, unplanned pregnancy seldom happens, and few people in the media having sex ever seem to be married or even especially committed to each other. Is this consistent with your expectations and values? If not, it is important to talk with your foster children about what the media portray and what you think about it.

Encourage your kids to think critically: ask them what they think about the programs or movies they watch and the music they listen to. Watch their favorite shows with them and ask whether what they see on TV relates to anything in their lives or their friend's lives. While you cannot fully control what your foster children see and hear, you can certainly make your views known and control the media in your own house. For example, you can put the computer and television in an open space, not in a bedroom, so that they are easier to monitor. ■

"I watch BET; I sit there with them. We watch the rap videos and we talk about movies, religion, their friends—everything. You have got to be able to communicate with them at all costs." ~ Foster father

TIP # 7

Don't forget the boys — Talk to your foster sons and your foster daughters. Avoid the double standard.

The 820,000 teen girls who get pregnant each year don't do it alone. Boys may feel a lot of pressure to have sex to prove something to their friends or to impress a girl. Talk with boys — not just girls — about the emotional and health consequences of sex, responsibility, love, and values. Boys need to know that teen pregnancy has serious consequences for them, too. Some people have said that "a few minutes of pleasure can lead to 18 years of responsibility." Tell them how becoming a parent carries financial consequences and can interfere with achieving their educational and career goals. ■

TIP # 8

**Discourage dating at an early age.
Watch out for age differences in relationships.**

Allowing your foster teens to enter a serious dating relationship much before age 16 can lead to increased risk for getting pregnant. Instead, support group activities. Make your strong feelings about this known early on — that way it won't appear as though you disapprove of a particular person.

In addition, take a strong stand against your foster daughter dating a boy significantly older than she is. Don't allow your foster son to develop an intense relationship with a girl much younger than he is.

Try setting a limit of no more than a two- (or at most three) year age difference. Older guys often seem more mature or even glamorous to a younger girl. The power differences between younger girls and older boys, however, can lead girls into risky situations, including unwanted sex and sex with no protection. Young boys with older girls bring similar risks. ■

“I have a no dating rule for my younger teens. But once they start driving, it's difficult to forbid dating. I talk to my older foster teens about what they want in a relationship and about their definition of dating. I have them bring their boyfriend or girlfriend over to the house so I can meet them. I try to meet the parents too.” ~ Foster mother

“Older men take advantage of you because they think you don't know any better.” – Foster teen

TIP # 9

Encourage your foster child to become involved in positive activities such as sports, arts, community-service, faith-based activities, or other after-school programs.

Getting involved in hobbies, sports, or the arts can help foster youth build confidence and self-esteem by mastering skills. Self-esteem is earned, not given. One of the best ways to earn it is by doing something well. Give them something positive to say “yes” to by providing them with alternatives to engaging in risky behavior. Community service, in particular, not only teaches job skills, but can also put teens in touch with other committed and caring adults. Many religious organizations have positive youth activities. Check out the resources for foster youth in your community such as camps, mentoring programs, and college preparation courses. ■

“My foster parent had me involved in extra-curricular activities. Tap dancing, math classes, after-school programs, etc. And that was good, it took my mind off of the negative things in my life. I didn't have so much free time on my hands to actually think about sex.” ~ Foster teen

TIP # 10

Help your foster teens to have options for the future that are more attractive than early pregnancy and parenthood.

The chances that your foster children will delay sex, pregnancy, and parenthood are significantly increased if they believe they have a successful future ahead of them. This means highlighting their talents, helping them set meaningful goals for the future, talking to them in concrete terms about what it will take to reach their goals, and providing help along the way. Encourage them to take school seriously and graduate high school. Take them to visit college campuses. Teach them to use free time in a constructive way, such as setting aside time to complete homework assignments. Explain how becoming pregnant or causing a pregnancy can get in the way of their plans for the future. Let them know that they will be able to provide their children with a better life than they had growing up if they wait until they finish school, have a good job, and are in a stable, caring relationship. Some foster youth may feel it is impossible to achieve all these things. Regardless, it is still important to encourage them to have aspirations and help them make those aspirations a reality. ■

“If you have already made plans or have goals of what you plan to do with your life, then having a baby is definitely going to delay that.” ~ Foster teen

A final note. Becoming a foster parent can be one of life’s most rewarding and challenging responsibilities. Helping any youth navigate the passage to adulthood, in general, and avoid such problems as pregnancy, violence, drugs, alcohol, smoking, and school failure can be daunting. Remember that you can make a difference. In particular, a close relationship with your foster children can be the best protection of all. It’s never too early or too late to strengthen a relationship with a teenager or to educate them about sex, love, and relationships.

Need more information? The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy offers many resources for parents in general on teen pregnancy. These materials include brochures and videos; all of them are low cost and many of them are free to download. Please visit the parent section of our website at www.teenpregnancy.org.

The National Foster Parent Association is a national organization which strives to support foster parents and remains a consistently strong voice on behalf of all children. Their website has links to state foster parent associations. Please visit www.nfpainc.org/.

FosterClub is a national organization with a mission to provide encouragement, motivation, information, education, and benefits for foster youth. Their website features stories from successful former foster youth, contests, and opportunities for youth to send in opinions about their foster care experience, and more. Please visit www.fosterclub.com and www.fyi3.com.

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