



THINGS YOU DIDN'T LEARN IN SEX ED

Guardian Booklet

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Introduction

This booklet serves as a supplement to the “Things You Didn’t Learn In Sex Ed: Booklet for Teens.” That booklet is specifically targeted at adolescents, defined as the time period between childhood and young adulthood that usually starts with puberty.¹ These booklets aim to focus on the experiences of all adolescents and is mindful to be inclusive of people in the LGBTQ+ community. The author of these booklets has taken information from published research studies on what adults who had gone through some form of sex education in adolescence felt was missing from sex education curriculum. As such, the information within both booklets mixes research findings and my own informed opinions based on the scholarly literature that I have reviewed while preparing these booklets.

Why Is this Important?

You may be asking why this booklet is important to have. I would like to present you with some information regarding the current state of sex education in the United States and how it might be affecting the adolescents in your life.

Sex education curriculum is typically referred to under two names: abstinence based and comprehensive. Those sex education courses that promote abstinence (not having sex at all) most heavily or as the only option to be safe are considered abstinence based.¹ Comprehensive sex education itself can look many different ways but is typically more based in research and gives more information about safe sex practices (or at the very least, information about sexually transmitted infections (STIs)).¹ Research has supported the argument for comprehensive sex education as studies comparing the two types of sex education and their effects on sexual health of adolescents found that comprehensive sex education led to a 50% lower risk of teen pregnancy for those students that received it.² Other research into the material covered in abstinence based education programs found that a majority contained inaccurate information and scientific errors.²

As you might know, the United States does not have a federally mandated level of comprehensive sex education, meaning that it is often up to the state you live in to determine what form of sex education is received by students.³ For instance, research from 2016 reports that only 24 of the 50 states required sex education to even be taught in

schools.² This has increased in the past several years with a 2020 report stating that now 39 of the 50 states required sex education and/or HIV education.³ But recent political arguments are leading to a strangling of sex education, especially for LGBTQ+ students, but more on that later. This leads to the sex education received by our teenagers to be interrupted by political disputes and moral arguments rather than science-backed research on what is most appropriate and needed for them to learn.

The last argument for the importance of this booklet is the lack of LGBTQ+ inclusive information within sex education classrooms. Not only have there been curriculum laws banning information about LGBTQ+ people within sex education, and classrooms in general, built into certain state governments for decades, but these restrictions are becoming seen more and more throughout certain states in recent years as well.⁴ This is incredibly disheartening as LGBTQ+ people have been found to be even more at risk for pregnancy, STIs, and risky sexual behavior than other adolescents who are straight or cisgendered.⁵ Even if your adolescent is not part of the LGBTQ+ community, they will likely interact with someone in their life that is. Research finds that learning about people different from oneself increases compassion and understanding for others but does not increase confusion about your particular identity.⁶

Why Are You Important to This Conversation?

You may be thinking that this is information that should be taught to your teen in school, by qualified teachers, and while I agree, I hope I have communicated the ways in which schools are unequipped and often barred from providing all the information they need to. Because of this, your role becomes incredibly important as you fill the teaching role not only as an “expert” but also as a confidant.

This does not mean you have to know everything. I have provided many online resources for more information about each topic throughout the teen booklet that you can explore with your teen. You might learn something as well!

Your role as a guardian of an adolescent is also different from your role in the life of a younger child, as you’ve likely already experienced. Experts on the subject of sex education identify guardians as sources of consultation and guided discussion rather than hands-on

instructors.¹ You will notice throughout this booklet that I provide you with ideas on how to talk to your teen rather than instruct them; you are encouraged to share the information you know to be factual, but also to share your own experiences as that can make them feel less alone and normalize some of the experiences they are having.

My hope is that you explore this booklet alongside the adolescent in your life and begin to get comfortable talking about sexual health, but also important life lessons regarding self-respect, healthy relationships, and other concepts that might be confusing for your adolescent to navigate alone. There will be activities sprinkled throughout that you can facilitate with your adolescent to break the ice, get to know your teen better, and help them begin to understand themselves.

Anatomy

I have not included a section on anatomy in the adolescent booklet. This was an intentional decision as most sex education materials focus so heavily on anatomy that other content is lost or left out. Anatomy is likely the one topic that most adolescents will be exposed to within sex education, so I strongly encourage you to discuss with your teen what information about anatomy they have been taught about. Alternatively, there are many beneficial and scientifically accurate resources online that can provide more information about specific anatomy information.

However, I would like to outline some things about your adolescent that you might not know.

First things first, contrary to popular belief, older adolescents have the same brain capacity as adults. They are able to reason and understand complex concepts in similar ways to adults. The real difference between the adolescent brain and the adult brain is the level of self-control over our impulses.⁷ In areas of risk taking or excitement, teens are less likely to control their actions, even when they understand what they should be doing. You may have vivid or only muted memories of what it was like to be a teenager, but I highly recommend that you discuss your experiences with your teenager. You might feel concerned that sharing your history will impact the respect your teen has for you, but they will benefit from understanding that they are not alone and that you have had similar experiences to them.

Understanding that your adolescent is intelligent and capable but might need help deciphering their impulses will go a long way in helping them make correct decisions.

When it comes to anatomy in particular, I have several suggestions for topics that you should make an effort to discuss with your teen. Some topics may be uncomfortable but will be beneficial to their growth and understanding and might stop them from seeking out questionable information online.

- Your adolescent should know about more anatomy than just their own. Sex education courses often separate classrooms by the genitals each person has and only shows them information relevant to that sex. This can be detrimental in teaching our adolescents about each other and ignores the very real and expected possibilities that they will probably interact with people that look different from themselves at some point in their life.
- While discussing anatomy, be open to questions that your adolescent may have about their own anatomy or that of other people. These conversations can be awkward, but they will get more comfortable with practice.
- Discuss your decision or someone else's decision about circumcision of your adolescent. There are many reasons behind this decision, either way, and it will likely benefit your adolescent to understand why you made the decision you made. It will also open the door to talk about those that look different from your adolescent.
- Discuss periods and how they work regardless of the gender of your teen. Again, this is a great opportunity to share information about their future partners, friends, and possibly even their own children.
- Talk about checking for signs of cervical, breast, and/or prostate cancer. Some of these can be checked for by your adolescent, at home, while others might require examinations by doctors. If you have questions, reach out to a local doctor in your area to ask what tests might be appropriate for your adolescent.
- Research and talk about hormones with your adolescent. While hormones are most well-known for aiding in gender transitions and gender affirming care, there are

many situations where a hormone imbalance can be addressed by medical professionals. If needed, talk to a doctor about how hormones change over the lifespan and through different cycles, like periods.

- Most importantly, try not to shy away from sharing information about any of your experiences with these topics. Sometimes it is most beneficial for your adolescent to feel that they are not alone.

Getting to Know Your Teen

Adolescence is a time of identity development.¹ Your adolescent will likely “try on” new things or experiences, even experiment of some kind. This does not make any of those choices less valid, but you can be encouraging and open to the things that your adolescent chooses to try.

An important concept to identify development is intersectionality. This is a term that was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw and describes how the different identities we each possess interact with one another, impact our experiences, and inform who we are.⁸ Essentially, we are all the sum of all of our parts. Our race, gender, religion, nationality, experiences, etc. all make up who we are and how we interact with the world. It can be important to discuss these different identities with your adolescent and ask which are the most impactful to them.

One of the most important things you can do with your teen is to be open about communication. This sets the precedent that their questions are normal and welcomed. This can also have an impact on how they interact with their peers as they will also find comfort in comparing their experiences to their friends and other people their age. You can destigmatize talking about these topics by:

- Being a listening ear for your adolescent through active and nonconfrontational listening,
- Being open about your own experiences with the topics they bring up,

- Encouraging your adolescent to ask you questions and, even more importantly, being open to answering them honestly, and
- Making yourself a safe person to talk to by ensuring that your teen doesn't fear being punished or you having overly negative reactions.

To help you become more comfortable with this kind of communication, I have created several activities throughout the booklet that you can try out with your adolescent. Make it your own and have fun with it!

Hot Potato Activity

With your adolescent, play a game of Hot Potato. To play, ask each other questions related to the topics of this booklet or other questions about sexuality, gender, and growing up in general. You can pass an object back and forth to show whose turn it is or do the entire activity by just talking.

It may help to have the object be something interactive like a squeeze ball or fidget toy so that you have something to focus on. It might be awkward at first, but that's okay! You can acknowledge that it's awkward and laugh about it together. Just keep trying to talk openly and you will eventually move past the awkward stage.

To get you started, consider the following questions you can ask your adolescent:

- What are you most excited about when it comes to dating?
- What kind of sex education are you receiving at school? Do you feel that you've been learning enough? What do you wish they talked about more?
- Do you feel ready to have sex? Why or why not?
- Is there anything about me that you would like to know?

Shared Media Activity

See the end of the booklet for directions on how to do this activity.

Some options to choose from related to this section include:

Books:

- On the Subject of Unmentionable Things by Julia Walton
- The Black Flamingo by Dean Atta
- Perfectly Imperfect: Compassionate Strategies to Cultivate a Positive Body Image by Amy Harman

Movies/TV Shows:

- Turning Red – Movie
- Sex(Ed): The Movie – Documentary

Sexualities

Most people can track their first sexual attractions to around age 10. Others don't experience certain attractions until later in life.² Both are legitimate and normal.

There are many sexuality orientations with differing definitions available in the world today. I have outlined some of the most commonly used within the teen booklet, but you can find more information and more options, here:

<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/types-of-sexuality#types>

Try to unpack your feelings about different sexualities outside of the conversations with your adolescent but be open to conversing about the topic. Sometimes guardian opinions about sexuality are communicated indirectly to their teens. If you make negative comments, even unintentional ones, about certain sexualities, you might be communicating to your teen that you are not supportive of a sexuality they might be.

I highly encourage you to discuss your understanding of different sexuality options, your sexuality, and/or others you have met of various sexualities. Ask if your adolescent has any questions about sexualities that you can answer or help them find answers to. It is important to remember, regarding all sections of this booklet, that you don't have to have the answer to everything. Researching a topic together can be just as meaningful for your teen.

Inviting In/Coming Out

You may have heard of the concept of "coming out" before. This usually means that a person who is not heterosexual is expected to tell other people what they have decided

their sexuality is. This practice can be empowering for some people but can be traumatizing for others. There is also an unfairness to assuming that everyone you meet is straight unless they tell you otherwise.

Because of this, there is a developing movement within the LGBTQ+ community to change this verbiage from “coming out” to “inviting in”.⁹ While this process may stay the same, some people believe that “inviting in” has a more positive connotation.

This changes the narrative to allowing people to share information with you about themselves in a way that they are ready. Your teen may not be ready to disclose their sexuality to you. I encourage you to give them space and time to determine when and what they would like to share with you. But providing continuous support for their decisions can be incredibly impactful.

Ideal Partner Activity

Ask your teenager to draw or write about their ideal romantic partner. Have them identify the five most important physical, personality, and emotional characteristics of their ideal person. Aid them by discussing the characteristics they chose and why they are important to them. Ask them questions like:

- Is this person based off someone (fictional or real)?
- Are the traits you described traits that you would like for someone to look for in you? Particularly the personality and emotional traits.
- Do you think it is possible to find someone that fulfills these traits? Why or why not?
- How did this activity make you feel? Why?

Shared Media Activity

See the end of the booklet for directions on how to do this activity.

Some options to choose from related to this section include:

Books:

- *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* by Angela Chen

- Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence by Marion Dane Bauer
- Ask a Queer Chick: A Guide to Sex, Love, and Life for Girls Who Dig Girls by Lindsay King-Miller

Movies/TV Shows:

- Heartstopper –TV series
- Love, Simon – Movie
- One Day at a Time –TV series
- Young Royals – TV series
- All in My Family – Documentary
- How to Make a Rainbow – Documentary

Gender

Gender as a concept has been separated from biological sex. Biological sex has been defined as the biological sex (of male, female, or intersex) that a person is determined to be by doctors at birth.² Gender is instead the way a person fits into the norms of a society.²

People that are intersex have both male and female biological traits, including hormones and/or anatomy. There are some situations where surgeries to change the anatomy of intersex babies are performed; there are other situations where it is not clear that a person is intersex until puberty.² Intersex is often an area that people are unfamiliar with. Do research with your teen on the experiences and realities behind being intersex, including infertility and discrimination that takes place with intersex people.

Gender identity is the way a person would describe the way they feel in terms of gender (female, male, nonbinary, both, etc.).² Like with sexualities, some people experiment with different gender identities before deciding on which one describes them best. Some people change their minds or experience new things that redefine their gender identities.

Discuss with your adolescent understanding of gender, your experience with gender expressions, and/or others you have met and their gender identities.

It is important to note that some people dress or act in ways to express their gender identity, whereas others don't. Some options for this include hairstyles and clothing

preferences but also things like chest binding and tucking. There are some safety concerns for individuals who did this in unregulated ways, so if your teen is interested trying this out, research safe options together or reach out to local LGBTQ+ inclusive resources.

Gender expression does not have to be static; it can change day by day or year by year. Be encouraging and supportive if your teen changes their mind.

Pronouns

Discuss the possibility of trying out new pronouns if your adolescent expresses interest in doing so. Explain that doing so does not make it a permanent change if they don't want it to be. Make sure to discuss who your teen would like to know about their pronouns. When trying it out, they may prefer it to be a family or close friends only thing. The important thing is to respect their decision and help facilitate their comfort.

Aid your adolescent in sharing their pronouns by sharing your own both with them and with others. Like with sexuality, you are often silently communicating your opinions about gender to your teen through how you talk about and interact with others.

Discuss enforcing boundaries and explaining pronouns. Create a plan or practice how to correct someone who misgenders you with your adolescent. Also discuss how they can correct themselves or how you will correct yourself if you accidentally misgender someone. Some easy examples of how to do this are presented in the teen booklet.

Shared Media Activity

See the end of the booklet for directions on how to do this activity.

Some options to choose from related to this section include:

Books:

- Being Jazz by Jazz Jennings
- Birthday by Meredith Russo
- Just Ash by Sol Santana
- Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides

Movies/TV Shows:

- Steven Universe – TV show
- Disclosure – Documentary
- Game Face – Documentary

Discrimination

There are many ways that discrimination can negatively impact your adolescent. Even when not directly at risk of overt discrimination like homophobia and transphobia, we all experience the negative effects of discrimination. Annalise Singh, a prominent advocate for transgender people and their civil rights, describes why she takes part in this advocacy despite not being transgendered herself in the following way.

“A better world for trans people is a better world for all of us.” – Annalise Singh

Homophobia and Transphobia

Explore LGBTQ+ civil rights and history with your adolescent through media like books, podcasts, movies, or documentaries. I have provided some below that can help you delve into this topic if it is unfamiliar to you.

Toxic Masculinity

Toxic masculinity is a term embroiled in the larger feminist movement⁺, but generally refers to the idea that boys and men are expected to act in a certain way due to their gender.⁺ These expectations include aggression, avoiding acknowledgement of weaknesses, and looking down on others who do not perform within their gender archetypes.⁺ Some researchers have identified this as a public health crisis that can lead to negative health repercussions for men.

Discuss toxic masculinity and femininity and what it means for you, your family, or surrounding culture. Certain groups may experience different versions of masculinity or femininity that should be considered. Remember that with intersectionality, our culture heavily influences how we interact with the world.

For help discussing and unlearning toxic masculinity, visit: <https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/health/services/promotion/general-health-social-wellbeing-sexual-assault-dating-violence-get-involved-prevention/unlearning>

Religion

Religion can be an incredibly important facet of many people's lives. It can also be an area that seems to oppose LGBTQ+ communities and contribute to gender discrimination.

Discuss your family, local area, or cultural relationship with religion and how it might tie into any of these topics. Listen openly to expressions of religious trauma, even if you feel differently about those same experiences.

If your teen expresses an interest in finding religious organizations that are more supportive of LGBTQ+ communities, explore local or online queer religious centers as needed.

Shared Media Activity

See the end of the booklet for directions on how to do this activity.

Some options to choose from related to this section include:

Books:

- Stonewall: Breaking Out in the Fight for Gay Rights by Ann Bausum
- Not So Pure and Simple by Lamar Giles
- The Grace Year by Kim Liggett

Movies/TV Shows:

- A Secret Love – Netflix documentary
- Reversing Roe – Netflix documentary

Boundaries and Relationships

Healthy and Respectful Relationships

Talk about the types of relationships that are available. I have provided a list within the teen booklet. If you are uncomfortable with any of the types, be honest but open-minded about how your teen might feel about those options.

Provide your insight regarding what makes for a healthy and respectful relationship. You can describe situations in which you have or have not felt respected by a partner to help your adolescent identify the difference. It is important to remember that love is a reward system in the brain which makes sexual activity and romantic feelings pleasurable to the brain.⁷ Your teen might have trouble identifying when and how to step away from sexual/romantic contact to make clear decisions. As we talked about earlier, their brains are wired towards more risk taking than the typical adult brain, so this can be a great place to provide advice on how to navigate a relationship.

Your teen also should know about libido and how it can be different for everyone. As described in the teen booklet, people have different kinds of sex drives like spontaneous versus reactive sexual desire.¹⁰ There are also things that can affect a person's sex drive like medications, birth control, mental health, among other things. This can be another great place to share your experiences on your own libido and how you have communicated with partners about it in the past. Remember, even negative experiences you have had could be learning experiences for your teen; just be honest and introspective about what you wish you had known at the time or how you might act differently now.

Finally, make it clear that you are a point of contact and support for them if they ever need to discuss their relationship(s). This can include friendships or romantic relationships as they can all be hard to navigate at any age without help.

Consent

Consent has been reported as a component of sex education that is not always required to be covered; in fact, in 2019, it was found that only 8 states required consent to be taught in sex education classrooms.¹¹ This is incredibly worrisome as consent should be the basis of any relationship as it outlines how the relationship will function. It is important to express to your teen that they have autonomy over their own bodies with any relationship they have, including with you. It is also important to express that another person violating their consent is not their fault, even if they were unable or unwilling to say no out loud.

Nonverbal cues can be just as important as verbal cues when it comes to consent. There are many resources online that can help you in describing what to look for to your teen.

There is an additional layer of complication to this. The concept of passive versus active consent describes how in some relationships, a person has your consent until you tell them otherwise. This can be a quite confusing form of consent for some people and should not be taken lightly. It can be difficult to explain the nuances of this to your adolescent.

Some easier ways to explain this is as something that takes place most often in established relationships, but that does not remove a person's control over the situation. For instance, your partner may not ask before kissing you goodbye each morning, but that does not mean you don't have the right to tell them no. Explain to your teen that passive consent may not be a safe option until they are older or in a safe and/or mutually discussed sexual situation. In any case, this form of consent should be explicitly and fully communicated.

Some topics about consent that could be important to focus on are:

- What consent looks like in a relationship at various stages
- What to do when you change your mind about something you previously consented to
- How drugs and alcohol can play a role in being unable to accurately and completely consent

Some practical ideas about helping your adolescent practice establishing consent are:

- Providing advice or options to your adolescent if their consent is ever violated or they feel unsafe.
- Explain escalating ways to revoke consent and practice with your adolescent to get them comfortable with refusing contact or other unwanted actions. If possible, this comfortability with controlling one's own body can be started at a young age by asking children as young as 2 or 3 before touching them, hugging them, or changing/bathing them.
- Create a safety plan for your adolescent to escape situations in which they feel unsafe such as a code word they can text to have you pick them up.

Having Sex

Some of the biggest impacts you can have on your teen's understanding of sex is to debunk some of the common assumptions that people have about sex. For instance, many teens feel pressured to have penetrative sex when they feel that this kind of sex is the only kind that counts.² Discussing how there are other kinds of sex that can be just as fulfilling to both partners, and how you should never feel pressured to have certain kinds of sex, can be beneficial to your teen.

You can also discuss how sex should be pleasurable for both parties and that unexpected pain might be the way the body is communicating its discomfort.

Discussing and answering any questions your teen has about sex acts, sex toys, or the steps to prepare for sex might seem awkward at first. However, providing a place for your adolescent to comfortably talk about or ask questions will aid them in understanding what is available to them. Much of the information teens gather about sex comes from pornography, which can be misleading and harmful in some ways; more on that in the Sex Performance section of this booklet.

While you as the guardian of a teen may not have much interaction with your teen's sex life, you might need to keep in mind the increased privacy that is beneficial to this time in their life. This especially applies to masturbation and nightly emissions, both natural experiences that many teens will experience. Nocturnal emissions refer to ejaculation that takes place in one's sleep, which is more common in adolescents, and could be somewhat embarrassing for them to experience.¹² Here is where privacy comes into play. You can encourage your teen to:

- Do their own laundry,
- Lock their door, and
- Begin practicing setting those boundaries with you regarding their room and the privacy they need during this adolescent time.

It may be hard to conceptualize giving teenagers privacy, but doing so can build trust on both ends and will ultimately lead to a healthier communication style for your teen both with you and future relationships they might have.¹³

Hygiene

Body hygiene such as showering at least semi-regularly, brushing your teeth, wearing deodorant, and changing clothes daily may not be something that every teen is aware of or comfortable doing. There can be mental health struggles that can contribute to making personal hygiene tasks daunting and hard to complete.

It could be helpful to make a check-in plan with your adolescent to get them further used to caring for their body hygiene. For instance, schedule days of the week in which your adolescent should strive to shower, wash their hair, etc. if they feel overwhelmed by the task. Be their accountability partner for those days to help them get used to the habit.

One area that can benefit greatly from your direct instruction is how to wash one's genitals. As you may know, scented soap and douching should not be used on vaginas and uncircumcised penises have different needs when it comes to cleanliness. Additional information on periods, UTIs, and yeast infections can be incredibly beneficial to share with your teen.

You can also ask what hygiene materials your adolescent may need you to provide for them, such as: pads, tampons, wet wipes, certain soaps, etc. If they are uncomfortable asking for certain products, you might consider providing them with an allowance of some kind to help them pay for those items on their own.

Body hair can also be a question that teens have about their personal hygiene. The growth of pubic hair early on in puberty can be somewhat distressing to some people. Due to this and just general preference, some teens will have an interest in removing hair on their arms, legs, faces, or pubic areas. Discuss the safe ways to deal with each type of hair as some require different methods of removal.

Adolescence is also a time in which adolescents with vaginas might need to begin seeing gynecologists specifically for the care of their vagina. Set a plan for future gynecology

appointments with your teen. Discuss the comfortability of your adolescent with you attending the appointment, staying in the lobby, etc. You can also work to settle any fears they have by sharing your own experiences and underlining the importance but also the normality of attending those kinds of appointments.

Ways Your Teen Can Protect Themselves and Others

As I've described before, safe sex practices that come from comprehensive sex education have been correlated with lower pregnancy rates and STI contraction.² Even when provided with information about safe sex practices, many teens still choose to stay abstinent. It is beneficial to share the safety options with your teen rather than insist that they remain abstinent to protect them from any potential sexual activity that they will have.

Things you can do to support safe sex practices in your teen's life include:

- Discussing your understanding and experiences with safe sex options like condoms, birth control, etc.
- Asking if your adolescent would like to look into safe sex options. Many types of contraception, especially those provided by a doctor, will require your permission and support as the guardian of an underaged person.
- Providing condoms or other safe sex options within your home (for all genders of adolescent), but in an area that is easily accessible and not directly monitored so your adolescent feels secure in using the items without criticism.
- Expressing support for the choices your adolescent makes in terms of their sexual safety.

Pregnancy

Despite common rhetoric about teen pregnancy, the United States is seeing the lowest rates of teen pregnancy in the last several decades.² However, the support for those that do become pregnant unintentionally is low. The best thing you can do as a guardian of a pregnant teen is to provide support for the decisions your teen decides to make. As you can imagine, pregnancy can be a terrifying prospect to a young person that is unsure how

to navigate the world of pregnancy, childbirth, adoption, and/or parenting. Find local resources to help your teen understand their options (I have provided some within the Additional Resources section of the teen booklet).

Discuss pregnancy and the steps that you would take to help support your adolescent in the event that they might get pregnant or get another person pregnant. While your emotions as a guardian can be overwhelming as well, try to process those outside of your interactions with your teen. This emotional time requires emotional, physical, and mental support; if you feel that a counselor or outside supporter would be helpful to involve in the situation, discuss this option with your teen.

If a pregnancy is unintended and your teen is interested in terminating the pregnancy, research and discuss abortion and other termination options in your area, state, or country. While religiosity often plays a large role in conversations about abortion, try to stay open about the emotional and physical limits your adolescent may have when it comes to carrying a fetus to full term. While adoption can be a beneficial route when an adolescent has an unintended birth, the pregnancy and childbirth experience are not to be taken lightly and it should not be assumed that every pregnant adolescence can, should, and wants to carry a fetus to term.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

While many adolescents are informed about STIs in their sex education courses, they are often not given explicit tools to avoid the contraction of infections. They are often told, just like with pregnancy, that the only way to stay safe is through abstinence. While abstinence is a 100% foolproof way of staying safe from STIs, there are safe sex practices that can drastically reduce your teen's likelihood of contracting an infection. Discuss the safe sex options that are available and how they can or cannot protect your teen from STIs. If needed, contact a doctor to further explain the risks associated with certain sex acts and safe sex practices.

Discussing testing options for STIs, especially if they have been sexually active before, can go a long way in destigmatizing the conversation around STIs. Again, doctors can be a good resource to visit and discuss the frequency and necessity of getting tested for STIs.

In the event that your teen does contract an STI, provide support for treatment but also for their emotional and mental well-being. Living with an STI can be stigmatizing and frightening, but there are many options for treatment and support available to those that have an infection. Reiterate that having an STI means going forward with even more care regarding safe sex practices to avoid giving the infection to any future sexual partners.

Sex Performance

Sending Nudes

While it is understandable that sending nudes can be normalized and exciting for teens entering their first sexual relationships, discuss the negative repercussions of having permanent nude content posted on the internet when it wasn't intended. It is important to discuss with your teen how these photographs are sometimes shared with others even when they do not consent. There have been cases of nudes sent within a relationship being shared online as a form of "revenge porn."

There are also legal ramifications when nudes of minors are shared with other minors. Many states have specific laws regarding whether the sending of nudes by a minor is considered child pornography distribution, and whether the receiving of nudes (still by a minor) is considered use of child pornography. Research and discuss the legal ramifications of nude photography of minors in your area just to ensure that your teen understands how these activities could have larger negative impacts on their life.

With all of that being said, it should not be your intention to shame or scare your teen about sending nudes. It is a normal form of sexual experimentation in a digital age, but some teens are not aware of the possible ways they could regret sending nudes later on. Have candid conversations with your teen about these experiences, but do not shame them if they have already participated in the practice of sending nudes.

Pornography and Sex Work

Watching pornography is quite common in teens as they begin to explore their sexual identities and feelings. This practice is normal and not inherently unhealthy. Experts regarding pornography have found more negative repercussions associated with how

people that watch porn understand and view sex with other people.¹⁴ Essentially, it is important to discuss how the actions, attitudes, and bodies seen in porn are not representative of real-life sex with other people (in most cases). Unrealistic expectations set by porn can be harmful to teens as they enter into sexual relationships later on. Research has found that some porn can lead to negative opinions about women and how they should be treated.¹⁵ Having clear discussions about how porn differs from real life can help prevent these negative interpretations from taking root.

There is also some concern about “addiction” to pornography. However, research has found that there is no basis for an actual addiction to porn; more that there can be intense distress caused by the use of pornography for those that feel guilty about watching it.¹⁶ Those that do not feel such strong feelings of guilt, and therefore don’t feel so awful for watching it, are more able to watch it in a “normal” way.

Associated with pornography are those that work in the sex work industry. This includes those who have sex with people for money and those that make sexual content in online spaces like OnlyFans. There can be negative associations with sex workers from decades of intense discrimination, but it is important to establish for your teen the idea that sex work is real work. Be sure to not blame or shame sexual content creators, but you can identify that consent is being provided in those situations that may not be provided in situations like revenge porn. This should further solidify to your teen that sending nudes can be used in ways that they have not intended or consented to.

Sexual Harassment and Assault

Within the teen booklet, I provided some direct definitions of sexual harassment, assault, and rape based on legal and research definitions. For your part as a guardian, I encourage you to frankly and openly discuss sexual harassment and assault that your teens might experience or have experienced in the past. It can be incredibly difficult to tell another person about these kinds of violations, so be sure to provide support and understanding if your adolescent expresses having been sexually harassed or assaulted in the past.

While it is true that law enforcement needs to be contacted if legal repercussions are going to be pursued for an act of sexual harassment and assault, this process can be incredibly violating for the victim. Discuss openly with your teen what will happen within a sexual assault investigation but be sure not to discourage or scare them out of seeking justice and help. If needed, seek aid through doctors and/or mental health counselors regarding sexual harassment and assault for your teen.

Regarding relationship violence, it is important to talk to your teen about the ways that this kind of violence can appear. Media and even research depictions of relationship violence focus heavily on a man perpetrator. This can be confusing for boys that are experiencing relationship violence at the hands of their girlfriends or female partners but can also remove relationships that do not have men at all (like lesbian relationships) from the conversation. Interviews with lesbian couples has identified this as an area of confusion for lesbians, who are not sure that what they are experiencing is relationship violence if a man is not the one being violent.¹⁷

The important roles you play as a guardian in any of these situations are confidant and supporter. Whether you are a listening ear or a supportive force for justice, your support for your teen can be impactful. You have the opportunity to help dispel the guilt that many victims of sexual harassment, assault, and domestic violence feel regarding their situations.

Shared Media Activity – Instructions

There are many opportunities in modern media to observe and talk about relationships, sexuality, gender, and other topics from this booklet. Have your adolescent choose one of the following or one of their choice that you can read/watch/interact with together. Create a book club or watch party with your teen and then discuss the media afterwards.

Some questions to ask your adolescent and discuss include:

- Did the piece of media seem realistic to you? What about it was unrealistic based on what you have learned through this booklet or observed in your daily life?
- Was there a part of the media that made you uncomfortable? Sit with that feeling and discuss what was uncomfortable.

- Did you feel connected to a character or narrative within the piece of media? What made you feel connected to them? Was it only your identity similarities or more so the experiences they had?
- Make up your own discussion questions or look up questions specific to the media you consumed online.

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