

Ask Amy



by Amy Levine

Expert advice on parents' pressing questions about sexuality.

October is National Family Sexuality Education Month, also known as "Let's Talk Month," an observance that reminds parents and caregivers about the importance of communicating with their children about sexuality issues.

How Do I Handle My Preteen Viewing Porn on the Internet?

Q: My 12-year-old son is always using the Internet.

He says that he is doing homework. After checking his computer without his knowledge, I realized it seems he has been viewing adult Web sites, possibly for hours on end. How can I bring up the topic without letting him know that I "spied" on him?

A: While it's possible that your son is deliberately looking at adult Web sites, it could also be that someone else has used his computer or that the sites appear spontaneously as pop-up ads. Whatever the case may be, the truth of the matter is that today's youth are bombarded by sexy images of scantily clad bodies on the Internet, billboards, television and in magazines. Not to mention, if he hasn't already, within the next few years your son will be going through puberty. Whether or not he's looking at porn sites, he's likely curious about how his body will look and may wonder what the female form looks like nude.

In the meantime, if you are concerned about his computer usage, set ground rules.

Try limiting his computer time. Move the computer to a space where you can observe his viewing habits (you can explain this by telling him that everyone in your family wants easy computer access); and most importantly, give him sites where he can find credible, age-appropriate sexuality information like www.teenwire.com and www.scareleteen.com.

As a parent, you are the primary sexuality educator of your child. So, if you haven't already, think about the messages you want to share. Then, open the dialogue and keep it open, addressing various topics as teachable moments occur. For example, use a magazine like *Maxim*, which is definitely for young men but easily accessible to boys, to illustrate that many models in the magazine are airbrushed to look "perfect" rather than realistic.

And, let him know that many companies use sex to sell sneakers, computers and other popular items by positioning models into very sexy poses. Flipping through the magazine, you'll likely find a few photos to illustrate your point. As you discuss each concept, ask your son what he thinks. While it may not happen overnight, hopefully over time a full-fledged conversation will transpire.

Amy Levine, MA, is SIECUS' family project coordinator and has worked at the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) for over nine years. She is certified as a sexuality educator by the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists. For more information go to www.familiesaretalking.org.

When Does Childhood Sexual Behavior Become a Cause for Concern?

Q: When in the bathroom at school, my 8-year-old nephew touched another boy's penis. He was told that his actions were inappropriate and it hasn't happened since. Still, I am concerned. Is this normal behavior?

A: Yes, it's normal for children to be curious about body parts. And, since this hasn't happened again, it's likely that your nephew really was just curious. If, however, this or other sexual behaviors continue after the child has been told what he did was inappropriate, it could be a cause for concern. If this happens, parents or caregivers may want to consider having the child evaluated by a professional who specializes in childhood sexual development and/or sexual abuse.

The book *Understanding Your Child's Sexual Behavior: What's Natural and Healthy* (New Harbinger) by Toni Cavanaugh Johnson, Ph.D., can help parents learn more about childhood sexual behavior. The book addresses healthy and unhealthy sexual behaviors of children and adolescents from birth to 12 years of age, and provides information to help identify, understand and respond appropriately to these behaviors.

My Teen is Writing Erotica. Does this Mean She is Sexually Active?

Q: When I was in my daughter's room, I stumbled across her diary. While I know I shouldn't have looked, the book was filled with explicit erotic stories. Some seemed to be made-up scenes with characters from her favorite TV show. One entry described her having sex with a guy. I think these entries stem from her imagination rather than real life; but, I wonder if I am being naive. Do you think this is an indication that she's sexually active?

A: Young people are inundated with sexual messages and images. Coupled with an active imagination and love for writing, these journal entries could simply be your daughter's way of expressing herself sexually as well as an outlet for her curiosity about sex. But, as hard as it may be for you to think about, it is also possible that she has been intimate in some way with another person. There's no way to know for certain unless you talk with her.

Try initiating ongoing conversations about all aspects of sexuality and sexual health with your daughter. This will not only foster a stronger bond and allow for you both to talk openly about sexuality, but it will also let her know that you are there to support her and answer questions.

Share your messages with her about puberty, body image, decision making, the media, masturbation, fantasy, peer pressure, contraception, etc. as "teachable moments" arise.

You can even start by watching that favorite TV show with her, then asking her to explain the characters' personalities and relationships.

Share with her what it was like for you growing up—if you were curious about your body's changes or had questions about sex.

Reveal your experience regarding talking with your parents or what you wished you would have been able to talk about with your parents.