



# Promising Youth Programs

Personal Responsibility Education Program

## Healthy Sexuality for Youth in Foster Care: Tip Sheet

### Parent-Child Communication

When parents and caregivers communicate openly and honestly, youth will be more likely to talk with them about questions or tough decisions, because they know they won't be judged, and will feel supported. The following communication strategies can help you as parents and caregivers approach and navigate conversations about relationships and sex with youth in foster care.



**For more information** on parent-child communication, see modules 4 and 9 in Healthy Sexuality for Youth in Foster Care: An Online Training for Parents and Caregivers of Youth in Foster Care [www.fosterparenttalk.org/home](http://www.fosterparenttalk.org/home).

### Get ready to talk with youth in foster care about sexuality

Before talking with youth about relationships and sex, consider your own attitudes, beliefs, and values. Sometimes, putting the needs of youth before your own attitudes, beliefs, and values is necessary to ensure their health and well-being.

### As you get ready to talk with youth, create an environment that makes it easy to communicate.

- Agree to minimize distractions so you can both focus on the conversation. Put away phones and computers and turn off the TV.
- Have the conversation in private so youth can feel comfortable sharing honestly. Allow youth to choose a place where they feel comfortable.

### Communicate the S.A.F.E. way

After thinking about where and how to talk with youth, think about the S.A.F.E. way of communicating as you navigate conversations and provide guidance. The S.A.F.E. method might be especially helpful when a question surprises you or raises concerns.

The tips and activities provided here are explained in more detail in "Healthy Sexuality for Youth in Foster Care: An Online Training for Parents and Caregivers of Youth in Foster Care," a resource for parents and caregivers of youth ages 10–19 from the Family and Youth Services Bureau and the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. The training and supporting materials are available at [www.fosterparenttalk.org/home](http://www.fosterparenttalk.org/home). Additional tip sheets related to the training cover contraceptive options, sexual orientation and gender identity, and safety.

**Your attitudes, beliefs, and values as parents and caregivers can shape the way you communicate and care for youth.**

- **Attitude.** Way of thinking or feeling about someone or something
- **Belief.** An idea that you accept as true without necessarily having facts to back it up
- **Value.** A set of beliefs that are important to you, which typically shape attitudes or behavior

## Stay patient

- Pay attention to your body language, keep your emotions in check, and collect your thoughts before you respond. Don't jump to conclusions before you find out more.
- Take a moment to consider what you know about the young person's history if possible.
- Validate their question by saying, **"That's an important question, thank you for asking me,"** or **"I need a minute to think about that. What do you think?"** or **"What have you heard about that?"**



**Tip:** The language youth use might be different from the language you use. For example, "hooking up" might mean kissing or having sex. Ask questions when their language is unclear to you. This lets youth know you want to learn more.



**S.A.F.E. communication:**

- Stay patient
- Accept the situation
- Focus on next steps
- Express care

## Accept the situation

- Make sure you understand the question or situation. You can ask youth to clarify by asking, **"What I hear you saying is [repeat what you heard]. Is that right?"** or **"Can you tell me more about that [the question or situation]?"**



**Tip:** Be mindful about your nonverbal communication, especially vocal tones and facial expressions.



**Caution:** Don't overreact if youth ask direct questions. Youth have a natural curiosity about their developing body and relationships.

## Focus on next steps

- Show your interest in the topics youth bring up. Answer questions and correct misinformation. Consider that youth could have questions they don't explicitly ask. For example, a young person may ask a specific question about something they saw on social media but may have more general concerns and questions about their changing body.
- It is okay if you don't know the answer. Offer to find out more together using accurate and reliable sources of information or reassure them that you will find out and get back to them.

- Don't be judgmental. Remember this is an opportunity to provide support and guidance and show youth that they can trust you to lead them to accurate information. Refer to the links at the end of each tip sheet for reliable and appropriate resources you can share with youth.

## Express care

- Remind youth that you're there for them, and remember that youth are looking to you for support and guidance to help them make the best decisions about their life.



**Caution:** Most youth already know that as a foster care provider, you are a mandated reporter. You should mention this role to them to make sure they know that if someone harms them in any way, you must report it.

## Use door openers and windows of opportunity

Now that you know how to use the S.A.F.E. method of communication, you may find it helpful to use door openers and windows of opportunity as you talk with youth.

### Door openers

Are simple statements or questions that can keep the channels of communication open in a nonjudgmental way. Use door openers, such as the ones below, to help get more information from youth or give you time to think about a measured response to a question or situation.

### Youth might be more willing to reveal their thoughts if you support their curiosity by using one of the door openers below:

- That's a good question.
- Tell me more...
- What do you think?
- I know where to get more information about that.
- Let's do some research together.
- That's interesting...

### Windows of opportunity

If youth are not bringing up these topics themselves, you can take advantage of windows of opportunity to have a conversation about relationships and sex. Windows of opportunity are teachable moments, such as the one described below, for parents and caregivers to share information or advice or to help youth to think about their situation from a different perspective. Even a small opening can allow you to start a conversation, share a gem of wisdom, or ask a thought-provoking question. Keep in mind, it is best not to share explicit or inappropriate details from your personal life.

For example, when you are watching TV or listening to the radio in the car together, you can use that window of opportunity to ask an open-ended question about what you are watching or hearing:

- Why do you think this character feels this way about their body?
- What would you do if someone you were dating acted like that?
- Those characters didn't know each other before having sex—what do you think about that?

### Use additional resources

Communicating with youth about relationships and sex is about starting small and watching communication grow over time. It might take time for youth to share their thoughts and questions and to be receptive to your guidance. Additionally, not every window of opportunity will lead to an in-depth conversation, but opportunities to talk can build on each other over time. It's never too early or too late to build trust and have these important conversations with youth.

We recommend reviewing these additional resources for parents and caregivers:

For parents and caregivers
<p><b><u>Talking with Your Teens About Sex: Going Beyond “The Talk.”</u></b> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides practical actions parents can take to strengthen their efforts to engage positively with their teens.</p>
<p><b><u>Talk To Your Kids About Sex and Healthy Relationships.</u></b> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides tips for talking to youth about sex and relationships.</p>
<p><b><u>Brave Conversations: Be the Someone They Talk To.</u></b> The Texas Foster Youth Initiative provides videos, resources, and activities to accompany its Brave Conversations training.</p>
<p><b><u>A Parent-Child Communication Guide: Options for Better Communication &amp; Deeper Connections with Young People.</u></b> The Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Power &amp; Potential provides practical information to help parents navigate topics that all families face.</p>

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