



Partnering with Youth to Promote Their Health and Safety

Parents and caregivers play an important role in keeping youth in foster care safe by promoting healthy behaviors. Research suggests a lack of parental monitoring is linked to a range of risky adolescent behaviors, including risky sexual behavior.¹ When caregivers work together with youth to set rules and expectations, it's easier to keep youth healthy and safe.

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. Additional tip sheets related to the training cover communication, contraceptive options, and sexual orientation and gender identity.



For more information on partnering with youth to promote their health and safety, see modules 6, 7, and 8 in Healthy Sexuality for Youth in Foster Care: An Online Training for Parents and Caregivers of Youth in Foster Care www.fosterparenttalk.org/home.

Risk taking in adolescence and how parents and caregivers can provide support

During adolescence, youth are rapidly learning new skills, discovering who they are, and increasingly taking risks.

+ Positive risks	- Negative risks
Some risks are healthy and give youth the opportunity to have new experiences and learn new skills, such as driving for the first time, joining a school club, or meeting new people.	Some risks are associated with unhealthy behavior, such as drinking and driving, smoking, vaping, using drugs, or having unprotected sex.

Parents and caregivers play a critical role in ensuring youth stay safe and have opportunities to take positive risks and grow in a supportive environment. Parents and caregivers can work with youth to set expectations and rules that promote health and well-being and help youth avoid negative risks.

- Develop a relationship with the young person; learn about their likes and dislikes, goals, traditions, friends, romantic partners, and extended family.
- Talk to them about the activities they want to participate in; find out where these activities take place and whether any friends and adults will be there.

- Talk to them about situations that might make them feel uncomfortable or unsafe and how they might avoid those situations.
- Make setting expectations for appropriate behavior a joint process; communicate any expectations that should not be negotiable, such as never getting a ride from someone who has been drinking.
- Communicate with them regularly, and check in with a phone call or text when they are away from home.



Tip: Be specific about your concerns and expectations. For example, instead of saying, “**Stay out of trouble,**” try, “**I expect that you will not drink alcohol or do drugs. Let’s talk about what you will do if someone at the party offers you alcohol or drugs.**”



Tip: Create a safe phrase youth can use if they find themselves in an uncomfortable or unsafe situation. If you receive a text with the safe phrase, you will know they need you to call them or pick them up right away. Tell them to call 911 if they are in immediate danger or being physically harmed.

Help youth navigate romantic and sexual relationships

Adolescence is a period when youth might explore their sexuality (see the tip sheet on sexual orientation and gender identity www.fosterparenttalk.org/home for more information) and engage in sexual behavior. Parents and caregivers can help youth understand the importance of setting boundaries and how to communicate and maintain them in romantic relationships.

1. Have age-appropriate conversations with youth, and let them know they can come to you any time with questions about relationships and sex.
2. Help them think about their personal boundaries and what they feel comfortable doing. Ask questions and suggest they consider their personal values, their school and career goals, and the emotional and physical risks of having sex.
3. Talk with them about how they will maintain their boundaries. Who will they turn to for support? How will they respond to pressure from their partner or peers? What will they do in uncomfortable situations?
4. Teach them that consent means there is informed, enthusiastic, and meaningful agreement between both people before they engage in any sexual activity,² and that they can change their mind at any time.



Tip: Encourage youth to use “I” statements to express their thoughts and feelings assertively and respectfully—for example, “**I am not ready to have sex.**”

Help youth stay safe online

Keeping a safe environment in your home means monitoring and setting guidelines and expectations for the use of electronics, the internet, and social media. Youth in foster care are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, which might start with a relationship they form online.³

- Remind them that any text or comments, photos, and videos they post online can be hard or impossible to remove (even on apps claiming that posts disappear).
- Discourage them from engaging with cyberbullies.
- Remind them that people online are not always who they say they are, and they should not talk about sex with someone they know only from online contact.
- Explain to them that it is usually not a good idea to meet with someone they know only from online contact.
- Encourage them to be cautious when using social media and set strict privacy settings; discourage them from accepting friend requests from people they don't know; and advise them to never share their full name, address, or school location.



Tip: Set expectations for appropriate use of electronics, whether it is appropriate to chat with strangers while playing video games, and whether any websites should be off limits.

Talk with them about explicit material they might see online

Partnering with youth to promote their health and safety might mean talking to them about explicit material or pornography they could discover online. It is developmentally appropriate for youth to be curious about sex,⁴ but it is important for them to understand what pornography is. Although pornography is generally considered an entertainment source for adults, the sex it shows is not like real-life sex.

- People in pornographic materials are typically actors performing a job, and sex in pornography is a performance for entertainment.⁵
- Pornographic materials do not usually show the use of contraception and condoms to protect against unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.⁶
- Pornography rarely shows sex as a healthy, respectful act. There can be a lack of communication and verbal and nonverbal consent.⁶



Tip: Parents and caregivers can set blockers, filters, and parental controls on digital devices to limit exposure to explicit content online.



Caution: Keep in mind that seeing pornography in adolescence can be confusing and potentially triggering for youth who have experienced violence or abuse.

Look out for these signs of grooming:

- Being in a relationship with an older partner
- Receiving unexplained gifts like clothes and jewelry
- Skipping school or activities often
- Not wanting to talk about or lying about where they've been or how they've been spending their time
- Spending less time with friends, or suddenly switching to a new group of friends
- Receiving frequent messages from someone they know only online
- Not having access to their vital documents and photo identification (traffickers hold on to these)

Talk with youth about sex trafficking and recognize the warning signs

Sex trafficking is using force, fraud, or coercion to recruit, harbor (hide or keep), transport, provide, obtain, patronize, or solicit a person for the purpose of commercial sex.

Partnering with youth to promote their health and safety might mean talking with them about sex trafficking. Misconceptions can make it difficult for parents and caregivers to understand sex trafficking, how to recognize when someone is in danger of being trafficked, and how to talk to youth about it. Here are some important facts about sex trafficking that parents and caregivers might not know:

- Youth might engage in a sex act in exchange for money or to meet basic needs, such as food, shelter, or clothing (people often call this "survival" sex).
- Sex traffickers don't always use violence to recruit their victims—some use psychological tactics to manipulate youth into providing sex.
- People of all genders can be victims of trafficking, not just women and girls.
- Youth who are being trafficked are not necessarily physically unable to leave or held against their will.
- People who are trafficked don't always want help getting out—victims might suffer from fear, helplessness, shame, and misplaced loyalty, or distrust the agencies that could help them.



Caution: Youth in foster care might be more susceptible to exploitation because of traumatic experiences, unstable living situations, physical distance from friends and family, and emotional vulnerability.

Traffickers can be family members, partners, acquaintances, or strangers. In many instances, youth are not kidnapped or taken against their will. Often, victims develop bonds or relationships with people who lure them with attention, gifts, affection, and friendship. Traffickers create a sense of security and protection for the young victim while isolating them from their families and peers. This process is called grooming.

Parents and caregivers can partner with caseworkers to prevent the trafficking of youth in their care.

- Talk to youth and provide them with information about sex trafficking and exploitation.
- Get to know their friends, so you will notice friends who are new to their social circle.
- Look for changes in their schedule, behavior, and willingness to communicate—they can be part of a normal transition to adulthood or a warning sign.

Resources

These topics can be difficult for all parents, but they might be particularly hard for parents and caregivers of youth in foster care. It might take some time to feel comfortable having conversations about the topics covered in this tip sheet, depending on how long the young person has been in living in your home and what their history is.

We recommend reviewing these additional resources for parents and caregivers and for sharing with youth in foster care:

For parents and caregivers	For parents, caregivers, and youth
<p><u>Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers.</u> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides tips helping youth use social media safely.</p>	<p><u>Social Media: Tips for Youth in Foster Care.</u> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides tips for youth in foster care to safely use social media.</p>
<p><u>Common Sense Media: Parents need to know.</u> Common Sense Media provides links to resources for parents and caregivers to learn more about media and technology topics.</p>	<p><u>A video series on bullying and cyberbullying.</u> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides information on bullying and cyberbullying.</p>
<p><u>Common Sense Media: Privacy and internet safety.</u> Common Sense Media provides links to resources for parents and caregivers to help youth stay safe online.</p>	<p><u>What is Bullying? (video).</u> AMAZE defines bullying and provides guidance for what to do if a youth is being bullied.</p>
<p><u>5 Ways to Block Porn on Your Kid’s Devices.</u> Common Sense Media provides information on how to block porn on youth’s devices.</p>	<p><u>Bullying: How to Safely Help Someone (video).</u> AMAZE helps youth learn how to support those being bullied.</p>
<p><u>Digital Awareness for Parents.</u> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides tips for preventing cyber bullying and protecting youth from harmful digital behavior.</p>	<p><u>Being Safe on the Internet (video).</u> AMAZE provides tips for practicing online safety.</p>
<p><u>Keeping Children Safe Online.</u> The U.S. Department of Justice provides tips for protecting youth from online exploitation.</p>	<p><u>Being Safe Online (video).</u> AMAZE provides information about online privacy and safety.</p>
<p><u>Preventing Teen Dating Violence.</u> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides information about and tips for preventing teen dating violence.</p>	<p><u>Dating and Relationships.</u> The We Think Twice campaign provides resources to help youth form healthy relationships through dating, family, friendship, and mentorship.</p>
<p><u>A Guide for Caregivers to Prevent Child Trafficking.</u> Love146 provides information and tips for understanding and preventing human trafficking.</p>	<p><u>Sexting: What Should You Do? (video).</u> AMAZE provides information about online privacy and safety related to sexting.</p>
<p><u>Child sex trafficking in America: A Guide for Parents & Guardians.</u> The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children provides information and tips for understanding and preventing child sex trafficking.</p>	<p><u>Permission Question: Porn (video).</u> Dfusion, Inc. provides two short video clips from their SkillFlix video series showing instructors in a classroom answering questions about pornography from youth.</p>

For parents and caregivers

Commercial sexual exploitation of children: a guide for parents. My Life My Choice provides information on commercial sexual exploitation of children.

National Human Trafficking Hotline. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services operates a hotline for reporting incidents of human trafficking. Phone number: 1 (888) 373-7888

For parents, caregivers, and youth

Consent Explained: What is it? (video). AMAZE defines sexual consent, sexual assault, and rape, and provides information and resources for youth, parents, and educators.

Sex Trafficking: What Is It? (video). AMAZE provides information on sex trafficking.

Could This Be You? My Life My Choice provides information and resources in this guide for survivors of youth sex trafficking.

National Human Trafficking Hotline. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services operates a hotline for reporting incidents of human trafficking. Phone number: 1 (888) 373-7888

Endnotes

- ¹ Dittus, P.J., S.L. Michael, J.S. Becasen, K.M. Gloppen, K. McCarthy, and V. Guilamo-Ramos. "Parental Monitoring and Its Associations with Adolescent Sexual Risk Behavior: A Meta-Analysis." *Pediatrics*, vol. 136, no. 6, pp. e1587–1599.
- ² RAINN. "What Consent Looks Like." May 2015. <https://www.rainn.org/articles/what-is-consent>.
- ³ Child Welfare Information Gateway. "Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for Caseworkers." Washington, DC: Children’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017.
- ⁴ National Guidelines Task Force. "Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten Through 12th Grade." 3rd edition. New York, NY: Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2004. <https://siecus.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Guidelines-CSE.pdf>.
- ⁵ Zaloom, S. "Kids Are Watching Pornography. Here’s How to Talk About It." *New York Times*, December 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/10/well/family/children-pornhub.html>.
- ⁶ Hornor, G. "Child and Adolescent Pornography Exposure." *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2020, pp. 191–199.

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