The Healthy Sex Talk: Teaching Teens Consent

We hope parents and educators find this list of 10 action items and teaching tools helpful for teaching teens consent, and that together we can help create a generation of children who have less rape and sexual assault in their lives.

1. Education about “good touch/bad touch” is crucial, particularly in middle school. This is an age where various “touch games” emerge: butt-slapping, boys hitting one another in the genitals and pinching each other’s nipples to cause pain. When kids talk about these games, a trend emerges where boys explain that they think the girls like it, but the girls explain that they do not.

We must get kids talking about the ways in which these games impact other people. They will try to write it off, but it’s important to encourage them to talk it through, and ask them how they would feel if someone hit them in that way, or did something that made them feel uncomfortable or violated.

When you see it happen, nip it in the bud. This isn’t “boys being boys”, this is harassment, and sometimes assault.

2. Build teens’ self esteem. In middle school, bullying shifts to specifically target identity, and self-esteem starts to plummet around age 13. By age 17, 78% of girls report hating their bodies.

We tend to build up our smaller kids by telling them how great they are. For some reason, we stop telling kids all the wonderful aspects of who they are when they reach middle school. But this actually a very crucial time to be building up our kids’ self-esteem, and not just about beauty. Remark to them regularly about their talents, their skills, their kindness, as well as their appearance. Even if they shrug you off with a, “Dad! I know!” it’s always good to hear the things that make you great.
3. **Continue having “sex talks” with middle schoolers**, but start incorporating information about consent. We’re often good at talking about waiting until marriage to have sex, or about sexually-transmitted infections, or about practicing safer sex. But we don’t usually talk about consent. By middle school, it’s time to start.

Ask questions like, “How do you know whether your partner is ready to kiss you?” and “How do you think you can tell if a girl (or boy) is interested in you?”

This is a great time to explain enthusiastic consent. About asking permission to kiss or touch a partner. Explain that only “yes” means “yes”. Don’t wait for your partner to say “no” to look for consent. Educating our middle schoolers about consent means we don’t have to re-educate them later and break bad habits, perhaps after somebody’s been hurt.

4. **Nip “locker room talk” in the bud.** Middle school is the age where sex-talk begins in gender-segregated environments, like locker rooms and sleep overs. Their crushes and desire are normal and healthy. But as parents and educators, we need to do more than just stop kids from talking about other kids like they’re objects. We also need to model how to talk about our crushes as whole people.

If you overhear a kid say, “She’s a hot piece of ass” you could say, “Hey, I think she’s more than just an ass!” You can keep it jokey, and they’ll roll their eyes at you, but it sinks in. They need a model for grown-ups who are doing things right. Even saying something like, “It’s also cool that she (or he) is so awesome at tennis, isn’t it?”

5. **Explain that part of growing up is having changing hormones**, and that hormones sometimes make it hard to think clearly. Sometimes that means our desire feels overwhelming, or that we’re angry, confused or sad. It’s common, and perfectly okay, to be overwhelmed or confused by these new feelings.

Tell your kids that no matter what they’re feeling, they can talk to you about it. But their feelings, desires and needs are no one’s responsibility but their own. They still need to practice kindness and respect for everyone around them.

This list of action items was compiled by Jamie Utt, Julie Gillis, Alyssa Royse and Joanna Schroeder, editors of The Good Men Project. To see action items 6-10 and more parenting resources, visit SafeTeens.org.