

# Parents, for your teenager's sexual health, talk to them about taking risks

May 5 2021, by Jen Gilbert

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For teens, the pandemic has spotlighted the risk of not being able to take risks associated with establishing new intimate relationships outside of the family.

Credit: Pexels/ Helena Lopes

For the past year, the pandemic has shaped [how young people have been forced to consider risk](#). Masks, social distancing, hand washing, staying home —these are new norms of safety for life [as what's popularly been dubbed](#) a "[quaranteenager](#)."

And yet, as the weather warms, and we take tentative steps outside,

teenagers will begin to navigate their own [desire for face-to-face contact and socializing](#) and their need to stay safe in the pandemic.

As parents work to support teenagers' emotional and physical well-being this spring and summer, let's not forget the ways this pandemic has interrupted their [sexual development](#). Teens are [supposed to be establishing new intimate relationships outside of the family](#).

Instead, a year-long lockdown [has kept teens close to home and increased their time with parents or household members](#) and cut them off from most physical contact with peers.

Just as COVID-19 has required parents to have difficult and frank conversations with the teens about [health risks](#), the pandemic provides an opportunity for parents to have frank conversations about sexuality and safety as well.

## Teenage years interrupted

Like adults, teens have spent the year in various stages of lockdown, but the cost of this time in isolation affects teens differently. Gone are many of the familiar experiences that are important to developing an emerging sense of self and the wider world in high school: dances, sleepovers, concerts, sports, parties, field trips.

All these losses add up for teens and emerging research shows the pandemic has taken a [toll of young people's mental well-being](#).

Sexual health researchers caution that sex education could get lost in a shift to online learning at school. They also speculate that one of the short-term effects of the pandemic on teenagers' sexual health could be [less contact with sexual partners—and that "longer term outcomes will almost certainly affect sexual activity and intimate relationships."](#)

Some clinicians testify that in their pandemic practice they've noticed [young people](#) are having [less sex and with fewer partners](#).

But none of this means teens have given up on sex: A [study of gay and bisexual boys aged 14-17 in the United States finds they they are watching more porn](#).

A study of [female-identifying Canadian teens aged between 16 and 19 finds girls were more reliant than ever on new media to initiate and maintain dating relationships](#), using online apps and [social media](#) to virtually flirt and hook up.

## Reorienting after COVID-19

Reorienting ourselves after a year of living under the threat of COVID-19 social, economic and health effects will be difficult.

Besides worrying about viral infection, parents have spent the year concerned about [social isolation](#), [lack of exercise](#) and [digital over-exposure](#).

As teens slowly emerge from the pandemic and reconnect in real life with their peers, they will bring this experience of living under lockdown to their dating and romantic relationships.

## Rethinking 'good' parenting of teens

Many social researchers insist that a post-pandemic life should not be a return to normal. As they argue, [normal life was marked by glaring social inequalities that have only deepened during the pandemic](#). For parents of teens, as well, a return to normal would signal a return to concerns about the risks of sexual activity. But what if the pandemic was

an occasion for parents' to rethink their relationship to their teen's sexual risk-taking?

As [social work](#) and sexuality scholar Laina Bay-Cheng argues, too often ["good" parenting of teens has meant restricting access to sexual information in the name of protection.](#)

She advocates for an ethical shift that asks parents to normalize teen sexual behavior, provide access to information and resources and transform the social conditions that make [teen](#) sexual activity dangerous.

## **The risk of no risks**

One lesson the pandemic offers is a chance to notice the risk of not having opportunities to take risks. Perhaps the pandemic can provide a chance for parents to grant their teenage children what [disability scholars have called "the dignity of risk."](#) Our duty of care cannot trump teenagers' evolving capability to reasonably assess risks worth taking.

Rather than frame risk as something to be avoided, young people could be supported to make decisions about risk in their lives, including sexual risk, in ways that don't put their own or others' well-being in jeopardy. Yes, this means talking to teens about consent, but [these conversations also should touch on the ordinary risks we all take in our sexual lives,](#) including the risk of rejection and the surprise of pleasure.

As my research has explored, how we talk to youth about sexuality matters among other reasons because the most intimate of our experiences can come to shape how we see and act in the world. Seen from this point of view, risk is not an [obstacle to development but the very grounds of its possibility.](#)

## Talking with teens

Let's talk with teens about the relationships that matter to them.

As teens venture out to explore and experiment with sexuality and forge their new, post-[pandemic](#) identities, let's not begin every conversation about sexuality with worries about pregnancy and disease.

Instead, let's afford young people the "dignity of risk," not only in their sexual development but in their whole lives—their friendships, their schooling and their work.

Such conversations can lay the groundwork for the possibility of teens or [young adults still enjoying spending time at home whether during the pandemic](#) or beyond.

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