Let’s Talk About Sex

VIEWING GUIDE
ABOUT THE FILM

*LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX* takes a revealing look at how American attitudes towards adolescent sexuality affect today’s teenagers. We live in a society that uses sex to sell everything from lipstick to laptops. Yet fear and silence around sex and sexuality also permeates our culture. Teens are paying a terrible price for this confusion in unintended pregnancy, STDs, and even HIV. And American taxpayers are paying billions to treat these entirely preventable problems.

The film’s director James Houston, an Australian fashion photographer now based in New York, tries to make sense of our contradicting attitudes about sex and sexuality by talking to the people they most affect: teens and their families. The film’s groundbreaking research includes testimony from experts and an examination of how other nations have succeeded in protecting adolescent sexual health where the U.S. is failing. A winner of the Youth Award at the Mostra de Ciencia e Cinema Festival and an official selection of the Provincetown International Film Festival, *LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX* challenges the viewer to take on this often uncomfortable subject and help protect the future of our young people.

*LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX* was produced in collaboration with Advocates for Youth, a leading non-profit organization focused on issues relating to adolescent reproductive health.

Visit [www.letstalkaboutsexthefilm.com](http://www.letstalkaboutsexthefilm.com) for more information.

USING THE GUIDE

*LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX* raises a number of important questions about teens and sexuality. This guide provides discussion questions, organized by the sections in the film, to help you and your family, group, or class start talking, and learn how to get involved in efforts to improve our sexual health and culture.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions can guide discussions of Let’s Talk About Sex and are loosely broken down in order of the film’s sections.

BEFORE THE FILM

1. How did you first learn about sex and sexuality? What did your parents tell you? What did you learn in school? Do you feel you were adequately prepared?

2. How do the media, religion, and culture influence sexual attitudes, values, and behavior?

3. What kind of sex education is taught in your school district?

Visit www.letstalkaboutsexthefilm.com/howtoadvocate to learn more about types of sex education and laws affecting it.

KELSEY AND HER MOTHER

1. Were you surprised when Kelsey revealed that she had had sex, but had never told her mom? Why or why not?

2. For parents, do you think your teen would tell you they had had sex? For teens, would you tell your parents when you became sexually active? Why or why not?

3. Do you think most parents and teens have frank discussions about sexuality? What factors might keep parents and teens from talking? How can teens and parents improve their communication about sex?

   - FastFact Teens who have had a “good talk” about sexuality with their parents are more likely to practice safer sex behaviors than teens who haven’t.

SCHOOL FOR PREGNANT/PARENTING TEENS

1. Do you think sex education programs that stress abstinence as the only correct choice for teens are a good investment of education time and funds?

   - FastFact The federal government has spent over $1.5 billion on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.

Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs prohibit honest discussion of the health benefits of contraception for sexually active youth. Concurrently, they have repeatedly been proven ineffective – and to contain bias and inaccuracies.

FAYETTEVILLE, NC (DVD ONLY)

1. Members of the Fayetteville community have different opinions about when it’s OK for teens to have sex. Do you think it is realistic to expect young people to wait until marriage? If not, what factors should they consider when making the decision?

   - FastFact By age 19, 70 percent of young people have engaged in sexual activity. Ninety-five percent of Americans have sex before they are married.

LOADED LANGUAGE AROUND SEX

1. Does sex belong in the same category as an addiction or a contaminant? Have you noticed other trends in the words people use to discuss sex and sexuality?

   - FastFact Some abstinence-only-until-marriage programs associate sexual activity with contamination or filth by telling teens that having sex before marriage is like chewing someone else’s gum or drinking their spit.

THE DUTCH APPROACH TO TEEN SEXUALITY

1. Would you feel comfortable discussing sexuality as openly with your parents, or your teens, as the Dutch do? Why or why not?

   - FastFact The U.S. teen pregnancy rate is over four times that of the Netherlands; the U.S. HIV rate is over three times that of the Netherlands.

2. The film depicts “sleepovers,” teens being allowed to have partners sleep in the same room in their parents’ home. What are your thoughts? Are there any situations in which you think this practice might be a reasonable one?
3. Do you think parents should make condoms and contraception available to teens? Why or why not?
   - **FastFact** Research has found that having condoms and contraception available does not make teens more likely to have sex.\(^1\)

4. Do the teens you know carry condoms? What do you think of teens who carry condoms? What do you think of teens who don’t carry condoms?
   - **FastFact** Thirty-nine percent of sexually active high school students did not use a condom the last time they had sex.\(^1\)

### Abstinence Messages

1. Do you think virginity pledge programs are effective for young people? Why or why not?
   - **FastFact** Although virginity pledge programs do help some teens delay sex, more than 88 percent of pledgers break their pledge and have sex before marriage. Plus, once pledgers begin to have sex, they are less likely to use contraception than non-pledgers.\(^1\)\(^4\)

2. Which approach do you think is a better societal investment: discouraging adolescents from having sex, or teaching kids about safer sex? Is it really an either/or question?
   - **FastFact** Programs which include information about contraception and condoms, as well as abstinence, have been shown to help young people delay sexual initiation as well as protect themselves when they do have sex. Teens who receive comprehensive sex education are not more likely to have sex than those who do not receive comprehensive sex ed.\(^1\)\(^5\)\(^6\)

### Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) Teens

1. Do you think it is important that schools include GLBT teens in sex education lessons? Why or why not? How can parents make sure their needs are met?

### HIV Outreach in Washington, DC

1. Are the teens you know worried about getting HIV, or do they think it’s not a threat?
   - **FastFact** The CDC estimates that about 1/3 of new HIV infections occur among youth under age 30.\(^1\)

2. How does shame around sexuality contribute to poor sexual health outcomes?

### Leah and Lizzie (Oregon)

1. Do you agree with Lizzie’s approach that teaching about good relationships is the priority for young people, with whether or not they’re having sex less of an issue?

2. The minister featured in this section of the film, and Oregon’s sex education policies, support open communication about sexuality in the school, houses of worship, and at home. Do you think Oregon is on the right track? Why or why not? Could your community adopt these practices? Why or why not?
   - **FastFact** Oregon’s rates of teen pregnancy, HIV, and STIs are much lower than national rates.\(^1\)\(^8\)\(^9\)\(^10\)

### Conclusion

1. Many adults believe that if you talk about sex, it encourages teens to go out and have sex. Do you believe that withholding information about sex protects kids and teens, or harms them?

2. How can communities support parents’ communication with their kids?

3. When it comes to sex education, do you think it’s possible to put politics and ideology aside?

4. While this film addresses cultural attitudes about sex and their impact on teens, many other factors also affect teens’ sexual health, including poverty, lack of access to health care, and inequitable access to quality education and economic opportunities. Did the film address these issues? How do you think they affect young people’s sexual health? What could government and/or communities do to address these issues? Which factors do you think most fuel the teen sexual health crisis?

5. What do you think should be done to improve sexual health in the U.S.?

Visit www.letstalkaboutsexthefilm.com/fastfacts to learn more about adolescent sexual health in the United States.
GET INVOLVED

You can help improve our culture’s approach to sexual health by talking to your kids (or parents), advocating for comprehensive sex education in schools, and encouraging frank discussions about sexuality in your house of worship.

Visit the Let’s Talk About Sex website (www.letstalkaboutsexthefilm.com) for more information on how to talk about sex and sexuality with your kids, answers to frequently asked questions, advice from parenting experts, and more opportunities to take action to support comprehensive sex education.

START TALKING

Frank, honest conversations between parents and teens are one of the most important steps in helping teens protect their sexual health. But initiating conversations about the facts of life may be difficult for some parents because they did not grow up in an environment where the subject was discussed. Some parents may be afraid they do not know the right answers or feel confused about the proper amount of information to offer.

To help, here are 10 tips from the experts at Advocates for Youth:

1. First, encourage communication by reassuring your children that they can talk to you about anything.

2. Take advantage of teachable moments. A friend’s pregnancy, news article, or a TV show can help start a conversation.

3. Listen more than you talk. Think about what you’re being asked. Confirm with your child that what you heard is in fact what he or she meant to ask.

4. Don’t jump to conclusions. The fact that a teen asks about sex does not mean they are having or thinking about having sex.

5. Answer questions simply and directly. Give factual, honest, short, and simple answers.

6. Share your values early and often. You play the most important role in your child’s sex education.

7. Reassure young people that they are normal—as are their questions and thoughts.

8. Teach your children ways to make good decisions about sex and coach them on how to get out of risky situations.

9. Admit when you don’t know the answer to a question. Suggest the two of you find the answer together on the Internet or in the library.

10. Discuss that at times your teen may feel more comfortable talking with someone other than you. Together, think of other trusted adults with whom they can talk.
SUPPORT COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN YOUR LOCAL SCHOOLS

Parents, educators, school administrators, and teens themselves can have a strong influence on sex education, especially at the local level. Anyone can be an advocate for honest, accurate sex ed.

To get started, get educated:

- Find out who is teaching sexuality education, what topics are being taught, and at what grade levels. Find out more about the laws and policies affecting sex education in your state through the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (www.siecus.org)

- Learn about the people who are involved in making decisions about the health curriculum (i.e., school board, superintendent, principal, curriculum supervisor, and teacher) and the process for selecting the curriculum.

- Learn more about sex education policy and funding in the United States: Visit www.advocatesforyouth.org/policy

Once you know about sex education in your community, start taking steps to improve it.

- Make your support known. Talk to other parents and teachers to mobilize support for comprehensive sexuality education.

- Contact your legislators to let them know you care about this issue and want to see change: visit www.advocatesforyouth.org/takeaction

- Work with your school board where possible: ask them to take on the issue.

- Find out if your community has a School Health Advisory Committee (SHAC) or similar advisory group tasked with advising your community about components of comprehensive school health in public school. In some states, these committees are mandatory.

- Visit the National Association of State Boards of Education at www.nasbe.org or, to learn how to become a part of a SHAC or similar advisory group in your community, go to www.advocatesforyouth.org/backtheshac to request assistance in working with SHACs on comprehensive sexuality education.

- Adults, make sure to include teens in your efforts; teens, remember that a concerned adult in your community is a strong ally.

- Don’t forget new media: use social networking to create social change. Links and comments on blogs, Facebook and Twitter are a great way to start a conversation about sex education.

For more information and ideas about how to get started, visit Advocates for Youth’s Sex Education Resource Center www.advocatesforyouth.org/sercadv

SUPPORT FRANK DISCUSSIONS OF SEXUALITY IN YOUR HOUSE OF WORSHIP

Many houses of worship acknowledge that human sexuality is too important a topic to be ignored in a religious community.

- Check out the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC.org) for more information.

- Learn more about Our Whole Lives, the United Church of Christ and Unitarian Universalist Association’s lifetime sexuality education curricula www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/ourwhole/
REFERENCES


