

## Adolescents' Rights to Confidential Sexual and Reproductive Health Care

Youth in foster care constantly face difficult life decisions that affect their future. Communicating accurate information with youth in a non-judgmental way about their rights to confidential sexual and reproductive health services is critical in helping them make informed decisions regarding their health. Youth in foster care have certain rights concerning their medical needs, including sexual and reproductive health information. It is important to be open and available to talk to youth about these situations, and be a resource for support and information.

### **Youth have the right to consent for their own treatment for the following services:**

- Pregnancy related services at any age (including contraception, prenatal care and abortion);
- Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) treatment\*;
- Outpatient mental health services\*;
- HIV counseling and testing\*;
- Drug and alcohol treatment\*;

Services marked with an \* require the youth to be age 12 or older to consent for their own treatment.

Youth have the right to have any treatment provided under this guideline kept confidential. The minor must sign the release of information for the medical provider to talk to anyone about the healthcare provided if the record relates to services provided under the confidential services guidelines.

While foster youth have the right to access care and information, you as the resource parent have the ability to positively influence the youth in your care. In order to best support your youth:

- **Offer a relationship built on trust and compassion** – Let your youth know early and often that they are welcome in your home, it is safe and that you care about them. By building a trusting relationship, youth will be encouraged to talk about personal topics such as sex.
- **Be open to talking about sex as part of an ongoing conversation** – Age appropriate conversations about relationships and intimacy should begin early in life and continue through adolescence. Two way conversations, not a one way lecture are ideal. Ask your youth what they think and what they know so you can correct any misunderstandings. Talking about sex should encompass more than just how all the body parts work. Include discussion about what a healthy relationship looks like, and what the difference is between love and sex. See page 2 for tips on talking to teens about sex.
- **Family activities are key** – Research supports that teens who are close to their parents/foster parents and feel supported by them are more likely to wait until they are older to begin having sex, have fewer sexual partners and use contraception more consistently. Going to the movies, spending time outdoors and sharing meals together are all simple activities to help your youth feel more connected to you. Encourage your child to become involved in positive activities such as sports, arts, community service and after school programs. Make sure you take an interest in their activities and support them by attending events and asking questions about the activity.
- **Supervise and Monitor** – Establish rules, curfews and standards of expected behavior, preferably through open family discussion. It is common for teens to test their boundaries and disagree with your rules. However, by maintaining structure you are demonstrating you care about their well being. Get to know your foster youth's friends and their families as well. Be aware of who your child is dating, and be wary of large age differences in relationships. The power differences between younger girls and older boys (or vice versa) can lead into risky situations including unwanted sex and sex with no protection. Encourage group dating make sure you are clear on what age single dating will be allowed.
- **Watch media consumption** – Today's teenagers spend over 40 hours each week watching TV, movies and videos, playing video games, surfing the internet and reading magazines. Many of these media sources send messages about sex and sex is often portrayed as having no meaning or consequences. Encourage your kids to think critically, watch their favorite programs with them and talk about the messages they see and hear.
- **Don't forget to talk to sons and daughters**– It is important to talk to both sons and daughters about reproductive and relationship issues as well as the emotional and health consequences they could face. Help them understand what a healthy relationship looks like. Explain the health and safety risks associated with different situations. Tell them how becoming a parent carries financial consequences and can interfere with achieving their educational and career goals.
- **Help your foster teens to establish goals for the future that are more attractive than early pregnancy and parenthood** – The chances that your foster children will delay sex, pregnancy and parenthood are significantly increased if they believe they have a successful future ahead of them. Highlight their talents, help them set meaningful goals for the future, talk to them in concrete terms about what it will take to reach their goals. Take them to visit college campuses and encourage them to take school seriously.

# Conversation Starters:

**Knowing how to start a conversation and how to respond to common questions is a difficult job for all parents. Below are some suggested questions/areas of discussion you may want to have with your teen, along with some suggested answers to consider:**

1. What does a healthy relationship look like? How do you know if the person you are involved with is the right person for you?

Getting to know someone before deciding to start dating them is important. A healthy relationship involves being open about what you are feeling and what you want in regards to the relationship. Relationships can be a lot of fun and can be very exciting, but they can be confusing or even complicated at times. Communication is important at all times, but especially when working through a difficult time. Both partners should be willing to talk about what is going on. If a partner is not willing to compromise, they may not have your best interests in mind.
2. What does it mean to be in love with someone? How does sex figure into the relationship?

When you love someone you care for someone deeply and want to help them and be available for them any time. You want only the best for them and you trust them completely. Both partners should respect the other and should make the other feel good about who they are. You should be comfortable to be yourself around them and with having open communication. Being in love also includes attraction. Physical and sexual attraction is a natural part of the relationship, as is commitment. Someone who loves you would never pressure or force you to do anything physically or sexually you did not want to do. It is important when in love to let your partner know about your life goals, values and beliefs.
3. How will you know when you are ready to have sex?

The decision to have sex is not a small one and should not be made quickly. While the decision process is not the same for everyone, each person should go through a series of considerations before making the final decision. Some considerations include looking at your own, and your family's, values and beliefs. What would your family or friends think and does it fit in with your values? Are you emotionally ready for a physical / sexual relationship? If you are not emotionally ready, you could experience things such as increased feelings of vulnerability, a desire for more from your partner including wanting more attachment and commitment from them. It is also important to ask yourself if you are in a trusting, caring and committed relationship with a lack of pressure to have sex. Lastly, are you, and your partner, ready for the consequences, such as sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy?
4. What will you do if you are in a situation where you are being pressured to have sex?

Start by being very open and honest with your partner about whether or not you want sex. It is okay to want to wait. If someone is pressuring you to have sex then they do not respect you. If pressuring continues, you may want to consider if this relationship is right for you. If you are receiving pressure from your peers, have a response ready for them. Try to hang out with friends with similar values and opinions on sex. You may also want to confide in or ask an adult you trust for advice or help.
5. If you have decided you want to become sexually active, what kind of preventatives do you plan to use?

Of course, the only 100% safe, 100% effective method is abstinence; however, there are many birth control options to choose from. Some of these methods include a variety of hormonal methods, such as the Depo-Provera shot, the NuvaRing, birth control pills, the patch, implant or IUD. There are also barrier methods such as male or female condoms, spermicide, the sponge, the diaphragm, or the cap. If, at any time, you believe the method you are using has failed, there are also a variety of emergency contraceptive choices for you to choose from. But pregnancy isn't the only thing you need to prevent. To reduce your risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections & HIV, be sure to use condoms. Remember, that in order to reduce the risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections and pregnancy at the same time, dual methods (e.g. birth control plus a condom) are recommended.