

Tips & Tools For Champions: Pre-Teen/Early Adolescent

Are you a champion to a young person in your life? A champion is an adult, like a parent, guardian, other family member or mentor, that a young person trusts to speak with them openly and honestly. Use the tips and guidelines below to start important conversations early, plan for the future, and build trust with pre-teens.

Key Facts about this Age Group:

- They are experiencing the physical changes of puberty, perhaps more slowly or quickly than their peers (puberty starts anywhere from age 8-14, in general).
- They have a heightened interest in friends, cliques, and romantic partners.
- They are concrete thinkers.

Assume No One Else Is Talking to Them About Sexual Health.

- Talking to your young person about healthy relationships and sex is normal. Incorporating elements of these discussions into your conversations will help facilitate an easier conversation in the years to come.
- Review policies on sex education. It is important to assume that no one else is addressing these topics with young people, so why not you?

It is Never Too Early to Start a Conversation About Sex and Relationships.

- The conversation can begin with topics like consent, puberty, and healthy vs unhealthy relationships.
- At this age, youth are increasingly concerned about what their peers think. It is important to ask about peers and other relationships early; normalizing the conversation will create a foundation for more to come.

Use Pop Culture to Start Talking.

- Try beginning a conversation by incorporating music, movies, or TV shows that the young person takes an interest in. You might ask about friends, possible romantic relationships, or future romantic relationships
Script: "I know some of the shows you may be watching, like *Fosters* or *Andy Mack*, tend to have topics that we don't always talk about. How do you feel when you see people kissing, falling in love, or holding hands on television?"

Be an Approachable Champion.

- An approachable champion may not have all the answers, but they are a trusted adult with an open door for questions and conversation.

Remember: Youth who have disclosed past sexual trauma may be triggered by such discussions. In this case, it is best to ensure that the youth has access to a mental health professional and meet them where they are in order to facilitate appropriate conversations.

Fact vs Fiction

- Research shows that young people learn about sex from a variety of sources including school, friends and peers, and parents or other family members. Utilize conversations about sex, love, and relationships to influence the young person's knowledge about sexual health.

Plan for The Future and Celebrate Success.

- Whether it's academic, extracurricular, or personal achievements, celebrate it! Motivation is a key tool in personal development and pregnancy prevention strategies. Communicate with other champions in the young person's life to encourage activities that motivate them. Weave in conversations about future family formation to help empower them to determine if, when and under what circumstances to start forming a family.

Ask open ended questions and provide support:

- "What do you want to be when you grow up? How do you plan to make that dream a reality?"
- "Where do you see yourself in five years?"
- "How do you want to be treated by your friends, romantic partners, etc.?"

Cultivate a culture of openness and allow the young person in your life to share their feelings without fear of shame or condemnation.

- Conversations about love and sex should center your young person, their thoughts, their knowledge, and the thing they're curious about! Be sure ask what, if anything, worries them.
- Listen as much as—or more than—you talk. Again, your words are important, but equally important is making sure that the young person's voice is being heard and respected.

Don't give up.

- Even if the young person in your life stonewalls you or appears uninterested in (or horrified by) these conversations, it's your job as their champion to keep talking. Trust us—it makes a difference!

Championing for Foster Youth

Find out how to be a champion to youth in foster care using the tips below provided by [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#):

Things to Know

- Very few youth in foster care report that someone is talking to them about sex, love, and relationships.
- 17% of foster youth reported age at first intercourse between 10 and 12 years old.



Things You Can Do to Help

- Foster parents and other champions in the lives of foster youth are key influencers. It's critical that foster youth feel empowered to make healthy decisions for themselves. It's important that you encourage your young person take charge of his or her own future—in both big and small ways— while you listen, guide, and support. During daily life, provide youth with frequent opportunities to make decisions. Use each choice as a way to incorporate messages about future story, sex, love, and relationships.
- Start early and talk often. Preparing for adulthood does not occur overnight. Don't wait until youth are nearing the date they leave your care, to jumpstart meaningful conversations. Use daily conversations to introduce important concepts, your young person is listening.
- Medically accurate information about sexual and reproductive health is crucial to a young person's wellbeing. Talk to other champions in the youth's life and consider bringing this up in front of a judge or case worker who has the authority to mandate educational programs.

For more information on how to be a champion for the foster youth in your life, visit www.childwelfare.gov