

**Q: How do I tell my son about the birds and the bees? A: Don't!**By [Sarah Kelly](#)

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Last week, in the first of our two-part guide to surviving teenage traumas, we examined the dilemmas parents face when confronted with physical changes related to adolescence. Here, we speak to medical experts about how parents should deal with the psychological changes that older teenagers may be facing.

**Q. My teenager is moody and uncommunicative. Is this just angst or something more serious such as depression?****A.** Dr Stephen Westgarth, a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist at Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust, says: 'The thing to watch out for is a general change in mood and energy.'

If your child was previously outgoing and happy but has become withdrawn, then the situation needs to be investigated.'



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Awkward: Eugene Levy, left, and Jason Biggs in the hilarious facts-of-life-chat scene in American Pie

He says speak to them when they are winding down, such as just before bed. 'Explain that you are concerned – not annoyed – and that they can talk to you about their problems. Speak to one of their friends or a teacher at school to see if anything traumatic has happened.'

A GP cannot start prescribing antidepressants to under-18s so they will suggest lifestyle changes and counselling. If a teenager does not respond to the changes suggested, they can be referred to a child psychiatrist.

'Psychotherapy can help and family therapy can be beneficial,' says Dr Westgarth. 'Keep your teenager active with fun as well as constructive tasks. Just loading the dishwasher or taking out the rubbish bins can help make the child feel part of happy family and help prevent depression.'

**Q. My daughter is missing meals and complaining about being fat when she's thin. Should I worry, or is this just a normal phase?****A.** Dr Dee Dawson, an expert in childhood eating disorders, says: 'If your child is cutting down on food without skipping meals, treating themselves occasionally and their weight is not dropping drastically, then they are engaging in normal teenage behaviour.'

Girls especially will 'try out' extreme diets to show off to friends – but this doesn't mean parents should turn a blind eye.

'As soon as your child starts counting calories, cutting out certain food groups, skipping meals and losing weight rapidly, then swift, firm action must be taken,' says Dr Dawson.

Early stages of an eating disorder require an unyielding attitude from the parent. 'Sit your child down and tell them that they will not be allowed out, or they will not get their pocket money unless they finish their meal.'

'You also need to weigh the teenager regularly if they seem to be getting smaller. Remember you are their parent and have the right to demand this. If you don't stamp out these behaviours early on, they will consume the child.'

'In some cases, a GP may be able to help, but they are not qualified to treat eating disorders so you will need an urgent referral to a specialist.'

**Q. I want my teenager to know about safe sex. How can I tackle the subject without encouraging sex?****A.** Dr Ghazala Afzal, a specialist in child and adolescent psychiatry at the Capio Nightingale Hospital in London, says it isn't necessary to have a formal conversation.

'From the age of 12, sex should be discussed openly, but not in direct relation to your child. There will be sex education at school teaching the facts, so what you need to do is instil values,' she says.



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Safe sex: As the child gets older you should talk about contraception but not in direct relation to the teenager

'Discuss news stories or soap opera storylines that may help you explain how important love and respect is in relation to sex without making the teenager feel cornered.'

'As the child gets older you should talk about contraception but again, not in direct relation to the teenager – it might even seem as if you are encouraging them to have sex.'

Use news stories in casual conversation to explain how it is important to take precautions and that people can easily get hold of contraception if they need it.

'Then, when a teenager starts having a relationship, it should be easy for the parent to say, 'Well, you know how I feel about relationships' without going through the often cringeworthy parent-child talk.'

And if a teenager does bring a boyfriend or girlfriend home, make it clear where your boundaries rest. 'Your children live in your house so be clear on what you will and won't accept,' adds Dr Afzal.

**Q. Is having a glass of wine with a meal a good way to teach responsible drinking?****A.** Professor Roger Williams, of The London Clinic Liver Centre, says alcohol should be strictly limited during adolescence.

He says: 'The livers of children are far more susceptible to damage and what might seem like a small amount – two cans of beer – is four units of alcohol, which is a lot for a young person's liver.'

'However, I wouldn't stop an older teenager enjoying a glass of Baileys at Christmas but that should be the limit.'

Prof Williams also believes that parents seen drinking regularly in front of children will encourage an unhealthy relationship with alcohol.

He says: 'Years ago it was thought that letting a teenager drink a small glass of wine with their parents at dinner was an effective way of educating a child about responsible drinking. In fact, it does quite the opposite.'

If you make alcohol an everyday occurrence rather than a treat, it will not be respected as the intoxicating substance that it is.

'Studies have shown that those who are allowed to drink large amounts in adolescence are much more likely to drink excessively in middle age.'

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Talk about contraception but don't relate it directly to the teen? Totally disagree! I want my children to have condoms &amp; I will buy them a starter set! I would also want my daughter to know that I would gladly teach her to get birth control pills. I want my kids fully protected at all times &amp; I have no plans to be anything other than direct. I'd rather have 10 minutes of them squirming than a grandchild too soon.

- Sarah the nurse, Iowa City USA, 04/12/2011 04:35

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I disagree with the comment about how you teach your child about sex, mum used a hypothetical situation and it made me curious, then when I was 15, she said to me, if you're going to start having sex, I'd rather you were safe use a condom, I was a virgin til I was almost 18... and the curiosity died there and then, and No, mum talking to me, didn't encourage me to have sex, nor did the box of condoms she bought me and told me to keep one on me all the time encourage me either, best approach possible it was.

- Blair Rose, Ashton Under Lyne, 04/12/2011 02:43

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