

Helping parents and carers understand the sexual behaviour of teenagers

This guide aims to help you understand the difference between expected teenage sexual exploration and behaviour that can harm others or themselves. It will also point you towards helpful responses.



Supporting your children during their teens

Every child will develop in their own way. During their teenage years most children will go through puberty, start to have sexual feelings, form different types of relationships and look for sexual experiences. As a parent, it can feel uncomfortable to think about this and to know how to help.

Teens get information and ideas about sex and relationships from the media, social media and friends. Teens might find it too awkward or embarrassing to ask their parents questions and often go online to explore and express their sexual identities.

The internet helps young people socialise, make friends and learn, but it also exposes them to risks. Teens can feel pressured to share sexual pictures online, receive explicit messages from strangers and peers, or have sexual interactions through live streaming platforms.

Things to think about

- Teenagers develop at different rates and typically continue to grow in maturity into young adulthood. Young people are still learning how their words and actions affect others.
- Girls in particular often experience sexual harassment or bullying, including at school, when socialising, or online from strangers or peers.
- Young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ might also be at higher risk of online and offline sexual harassment.
- Young people with disabilities are more likely to experience higher levels of sexual harassment and abuse, both online and offline.
- It is a parent's role to support their children's development, including sexual development, and to keep them safe from harm. Part of this is to notice and challenge any abusive behaviour and the unhelpful attitudes that lead to this, for example victim blaming.



Understanding teenage sexual behaviour

Young people might behave sexually in different ways, including online and offline. Often this is in line with their healthy sexual development, whilst others might cause concern. Every situation and family is different and the context, along with your family values, might lead you to feel more or less concerned and unsure how to best respond.

Sexual behaviour is less likely to be problematic if it is:

- between young people of a similar age and developmental stage
- voluntary and consensual
- balanced with other interests, hobbies and experiences
- expected behaviour for your child's age.



The traffic light system

We've used a traffic light system to help you work out if a behaviour is:

- expected (green)
- inappropriate (amber)
- abusive (red).



We've given some examples in each category and some suggestions on how to respond, but these aren't meant to be a full list of possibilities.

Please call our anonymous helpline, use our live chat or secure email system if you would like to discuss any worries. If you're not sure, it's always best to trust your gut and get support.

Children with additional needs

This includes children with physical and sensory impairments, learning disabilities and autism, and those who have life-limiting or threatening conditions.

If your child has additional needs, they may experience extra challenges in navigating the big changes through their teenage years. Their needs and vulnerabilities may be unique, possibly making it difficult to use this traffic light tool. To get helpful advice tailored to you, please contact our Stop It Now! helpline and speak with a social worker, education or health professional.

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The traffic light guide

Green

Green behaviours might be expected for your child's age and stage of development. They give an opportunity to support and talk to your teen about what is appropriate.

Examples of green behaviours include:

- occasionally making light-hearted sexual jokes with friends of a similar age
- flirting or sending sexual messages to someone the same age, if both consent
- asking questions about sex and relationships
- looking at online information about sex and relationships
- masturbating at home, when alone in a private space
- showing affection and experiencing physical intimacy, such as kissing, hugging and holding hands
- sexual activity, including sexual touch, oral sex and penetrative sex amongst older consenting teenagers
- not having sexual feelings or choosing not to experiment sexually.

Many teenagers will see pornography online. They might search for it, find it by accident or be shown it by someone else.

But pornography shouldn't be used to learn about sex or relationships. It often ignores the values of respect and consent, and gives unhelpful expectations about gender roles and body image.

Finding out about what is being taught in school about pornography and talking with young people about these issues can help them to spot and reject unhelpful messages and ideas.

Remember...

Listen to your gut feelings and trust your instinct. Sometimes behaviours that look green on the surface can be more concerning, depending on the context.

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Green example

You find out that your 15-year-old son has been using the search terms “lesbian porn” and “threesome” online.

- Talk to your child about pornography, what it is, why people look at it, what the risks can be, and how it is different from real-life relationships. You can find helpful tips and advice for these types of difficult conversations in our [harmful sexual behaviour prevention toolkit](#).
- These conversations can be awkward, so plan a time where you can have this chat privately, take a matter-of-fact approach and be careful to avoid saying things that might shame them.
- Some young people use pornography to learn about sex because it is easily accessible. Encourage them to visit other websites to explore sex and relationships for themselves, such as [Brook](#).
- If they keep looking at pornography, consider ways you can help them to stay as safe as possible. For example, encourage them to be careful about which websites they visit, minimise the time they spend looking at pornography, avoid inappropriate search terms like ‘teen sex’ which could lead them to seeing videos or pictures of under-18s and urge them not to share pornography with other people.
- Learn about what type of sexual images are illegal and explain the consequences of viewing these images. You can find out more about this on our [Parents Protect](#) website.
- Talk to them about how they might know if their pornography use was becoming more problematic, and what they can do if they are finding it hard to stop.
- If you’d like to talk through any of the above, please contact our confidential helpline for advice and support.

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Amber

Amber behaviours are concerning and might be harmful for a teenager. They may be a sign your child needs extra guidance and support from you or another trusted adult, particularly if issues continue over time. Talking with your child about the concerns might help you find ways to keep them and others safe.

Examples of amber behaviours include:

- choosing to spend time viewing sexual pictures and videos over other hobbies and interests they enjoy
- sending pornography to others
- using overly sexualised language
- exploring extreme sexual fetishes, involving physical harm or illegal behaviour
- seeking sexual advice from untrustworthy sources, such as pornography or unmoderated forums
- willingly engaging in sexual activity with someone of a similar age during early adolescence
- sharing sexual pictures or videos of themselves with someone of a similar age. This might be common, but can be risky and it is illegal to possess, make or share a sexual picture or video of someone under 18.

Some of these behaviours might be fairly common amongst teenagers, and it can be difficult to know when they reach a level of concern. For example, people will have different opinions on how much time watching pornography is too much.

Talking through your worries with your child can help you judge how much of a problem the behaviour is.

You might start to think it is a red behaviour if it continues or gets more frequent even after speaking with your child.

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Amber example

You get a call from school to say your 14-year-old daughter's phone has been confiscated because some of her year group had been playing a sexual game on a live streaming app the evening before.

- This information might be upsetting to hear. Try to remain calm and avoid jumping to conclusions. First off, get as much information from the school as you can about what happened and how your child is thought to have been involved.
- Ask your child what happened, how they feel about it, and if they felt under any pressure to take part. Were any adults or much older teenagers involved? Was anyone upset? Some of these details may increase or decrease your level of concern. Make sure to share any worries with the school so they can take steps to safeguard everyone involved.
- Thank your child for being open with you and remind them that they can talk to you about anything that worries or confuses them. Reassure them that you are there to support, help and protect them.
- Explain what the law says about sexual images, including that having, making or sharing sexual pictures or videos of anyone under 18 is illegal. Have an open discussion about why that is the case.
- Talk to your child about peer pressure and why some of their friends involved might have gone along with the game and seemed okay, even if they found it upsetting.
- Ask them to show you how the app they were using works and review its privacy settings together. Use this as an opportunity to open up lines of communication about what your child does online and who they talk to.
- Agree positive steps and boundaries to help prevent something similar from happening again. For example, having regular chats about what they have been doing online, exploring helpful online resources together, checking how confident they feel to say 'no' to things that make them feel uncomfortable and where they can go to get help.
- Point them to helpful information where they can learn more about sex and relationships. Our guide on [preventing harmful sexual behaviour](#) has lots of suggestions.
- Remember, you are not alone. Talk to the school and the other parents to share ideas about messages your teens need to hear and what resources they have found helpful.

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Red

Red behaviours are unsafe and might involve abuse or exploitation. They are likely to cause harm to your child, and maybe others around them. These behaviours need to be dealt with quickly, which might involve getting support from a professional, such as a GP or social worker. The confidential Stop It Now! helpline can also give you non-judgemental advice and guidance.

Examples of red behaviours include:

- taking or sharing sexual pictures of someone without their consent
- having sexual conversations or sharing sexual images with children much younger than themselves or with those that are particularly vulnerable
- pressuring other young people or children to do sexual things online or offline, using threats, force, constant hassling or other types of manipulation
- having sexual interactions with strangers (adults or other young people) online or offline
- looking at illegal sexual material, for example involving animals, children or extreme violence
- having sexual contact with an animal
- exposing their genitals in public or sending unsolicited pictures of their genitals to others
- having sex where either person is under 13, there is a significant age gap or other vulnerabilities affecting their ability to consent, even if they think it is consensual
- sexual contact between siblings or other children within the family.

Most teens involved in red behaviours who get the right support will not go on to commit sexual offences as an adult.

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Red
example

Your 9-year-old daughter tells you that her 15-year-old brother has just shown her some pictures of naked men and women and showed her his penis. She told you that this has happened before and he sometimes tells her to hold his penis.

- Finding out about this kind of scenario is likely to be very upsetting and can lead to difficult changes for your whole family. It is important to recognise the impact this has on you and get support for yourself. As parents, talk about how you want to approach this together and how you can support each other. This will help you to respond calmly and support both of your children.
- Tell your daughter that she was right and brave to tell you about what happened and that it was not her fault. Gently ask if there is anything else her brother or anyone else does or asks her to do that she has found worrying or strange. Ask her how she feels and reassure her that you will take steps to make sure she is safe from now on.
- Call the Stop It Now! helpline for support and advice with the important decisions you need to make as parents. Our experienced advisors can help you think this through and answer any questions you might have about immediate steps you can take to keep your children safe, including the need to speak with social services or the police.
- Make sure you stay calm and have plenty of time when you talk to your teenage son. Speak to him somewhere private. Ask him whether anything is worrying him and listen to what he says. Reassure your son that you are there for him, that he can talk to you and you aren't judging him.
- Be clear that the behaviour was not okay and help him think about and understand why. Explain to your son why his behaviour is worrying you and what actions you have to take to keep him and his sister safe. Be careful not to make promises about what might happen but reassure your son that you are there to support him.
- Ask your son if anyone has done or said something sexual to him that made him feel uncomfortable or upset. Ask him if he has been involved in sexual behaviour with anyone else.
- Ask your son what sexual pictures he shared with his sister and talk to him about his use of pornography.
- Decide together what you are going to do to prevent this happening again. Take a look at our family safety plan, so that all the children in your family are kept safe.

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Where to get more help and advice

If you have any worries, the confidential Stop It Now! helpline can help you decide how best to support your child. Call 0808 1000 900 or visit stopitnow.org.uk/helpline to use our live chat or secure email if you're not ready to speak to someone.

Worrying sexual behaviour might be a sign of stress, upset or even harm that your child has experienced themselves. Do not be afraid to ask if someone has done something similar to them. If you are worried your child may have experienced sexual abuse, talk to your GP, their teacher or your local children's services.

For more tips, information and resources to help you keep your child safe, download our harmful sexual behaviour prevention toolkit.

The screenshot shows the top of a webpage for 'Harmful sexual behaviour prevention toolkit'. It features the Lucy Faithfull Foundation logo in the top left and a 'Contact us' button in the top right. The main heading is 'Harmful sexual behaviour prevention toolkit'. Below this, there is a paragraph: 'This toolkit is designed for parents, carers, family members and professionals, to help everyone play their part in keeping children safe.' Another paragraph follows: 'It has links to useful information, resources, and support as well as practical tips to prevent harmful sexual behaviour and provide safe environments for families.' A 'Get started' button is located at the bottom left of the main content area. At the bottom of the page, there is a 'Stop It Now!' logo and the text: 'Call our confidential helpline 0808 1000 900' and 'For more information visit stopitnow.org.uk'. A circular image of a family walking is also visible.

Remember...

You do not need to try and solve everything alone. You can help your teens identify other trusted adults they might feel comfortable going to for advice. You can also point them to great resources online, such as [Brook](#).

Find out more about our work to protect children:
lucyfaithfull.org.uk

Visit our Stop It Now! campaign and helpline:
stopitnow.org.uk

Stop It Now! Scotland:
stopitnow.org.uk/scotland

Stop It Now! Wales:
stopitnow.org.uk/wales

Information and support for parents and carers:
parentsprotect.co.uk

 [Facebook: @stopitnowukandireland](https://www.facebook.com/stopitnowukandireland)

 [Twitter: @StopItNowUK](https://twitter.com/StopItNowUK)

 [YouTube: @stopitnowukireland](https://www.youtube.com/stopitnowukireland)

 [LinkedIn: the-lucy-faithfull-foundation](https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-lucy-faithfull-foundation)

Confidential freephone helpline: **0808 1000 900**

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The Lucy Faithfull Foundation is a registered Charity No. 1013025, and is a company limited by guarantee.

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Stop It Now!

UK & IRELAND

Helping prevent
child sexual abuse

Call our confidential helpline **0808 1000 900**

For more information visit stopitnow.org.uk/helpline