

Q & A—Help! My Teen Daughter Wants to go on Birth Control.
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Question: I'm a single mom and my daughter and her boyfriend, both sixteen, have been dating for a little over a year. They're both good kids, are athletes and get very good grades in school. I know her boyfriend's family well and all parents encourage the kids to spend time at one home or the other. I knew that they were probably engaged in some petting, but I have preached to her since she began to seriously date that sexual behavior should be saved for marriage. Boy, was I shocked when she came to me earlier this week, beating around the bush but basically asking for a doctor's appointment to get the birth control pill. I can't say that I was perfectly calm, but I did let her speak and explain what was going on. She said that she and her boyfriend were "getting closer" to wanting to have intercourse and they were concerned about her getting pregnant. She didn't want to sneak behind my back to get birth control pills, and she obviously was looking for my permission, not necessarily my opinion. She said that they would not have intercourse if she wasn't on the pill as they didn't want to trust condoms. I told her that I thought having sex at this time was a very bad idea and that I'd have to put some limits on their relationship. Well, she's furious with me and I'm concerned that they'll sneak around now and still have sex. What's your suggestion?

Answer: Okay, here's the good news first: they sound like nice kids and have a fairly long-lasting relationship for sixteen-year-olds. They've ostensibly been able to abstain from intercourse during their relationship (hopefully this is true) and it sounds like she values her rapport with you even though she's currently angry at your response. Now, for the tough stuff. In my experience dealing with scores of teenage girls who have wanted to, or have already experienced sexual relations, there are few easy answers. Almost all parents would prefer their teens to wait until they were much older to begin sexual activity—issues of maturity, responsibility, reputation, sexually transmitted diseases, religious beliefs, moral codes and a host of other factors complicate the picture. Most folks whom I've spoken with seem to feel that allowing their daughters to take the birth control pill actually encourages early and frequent sexual behavior, and they tell their kids that this isn't their position. Most parents who do allow the pill end up saying something like "I don't like the idea that you are having or are considering having sexual relations with your boyfriend. If I could dissuade you I would. But I know that I can't watch you all of the time, and I feel that the chance of sexual behavior will be great even if I forbid you to see each other. So, to avoid an unwanted pregnancy I'll take you to the doctor." And, the result that I've seen from later talking with these families is exactly that—early and frequent sexual behavior. Now, that doesn't mean that these kids would not have had intercourse had the pill not been allowed. But I do believe that the reduced fear of unwanted pregnancy does increase sexual behavior, with the original partner and perhaps with future boyfriends.

But, take a look at the other side of the argument. Many, many teens who do not take the pill engage in sex and some do become pregnant. An unplanned teen pregnancy is an extremely difficult situation—with many gut-wrenching decisions to be made. Religious

beliefs, family resources and support and a host of other issues weigh upon these difficult decisions.

My suggestion to you would be to have a frank discussion with your daughter and her boyfriend. Let them know how you feel about sexual activity before marriage, but admit that you realize that some teens their age choose to be sexually active. Discuss the ramifications of sex—a definite change in their relationship that can't be reversed and how they might feel if they do break up in the future, having lost their virginity. Discuss the facts about sexually transmitted diseases and how condom usage lowers the possibility but is not a guarantee. Explore how they would feel if others find out that they are being sexually active (which inevitably occurs) and what effect this would have upon rumors and relationships with friends. Listen to them and try to gauge whether they actually would refrain from intercourse if she wasn't taking the birth control pill. I have met many young couples who have abstained (still engaging in petting and other forms of intimate activity), but this takes a degree of maturity and responsibility that many teens have not yet developed. If you feel that they can be trusted to not be sexually active then you may decide to nix the birth control idea and allow them to continue to see each other.

If you feel uncomfortable with their demeanor, you can try to restrict their relationship, but that's often a recipe for disaster. If they truly feel that they are in love many teens find ways to continue seeing each other—leading to sneaky behavior and a loss of trust between parent and child. Some folks resort to threatening boarding school to keep the kids separate, but that's often not possible or even recommended.

Or, you may chose to allow use of the birth control pill and set an appointment for her with your gynecologist. A thorough examination and discussion of the responsibilities of sexual behavior must ensue—ranging from STD's, possible side effects of the medication as well as effects upon their relationship. Some folks believe that it is imperative to discuss this step with the other set of parents, since their child will be engaging in behavior that they may not be aware of. Your daughter will most likely be mortified about the idea of alerting her boyfriend's folks to your decision, but you can let her know that adult action (sexual behavior) merits adult responsibility (communication). This is another tough decision you'll have to make in this process.

Obviously, there are no easy answers. It takes a blend of understanding the realities of teens today, sticking by your moral and religious views as much as possible, valuing your communication and relationship with your daughter, and having trust and faith in her using good judgment. Keeping the lines of communication open between yourself and your child, as well as her boyfriend, is very important. They may chose to engage in sexual relations without your knowledge or permission, but hopefully your openness to listening to their feelings and discussing this adult step will provide some caution and perspective as they progress in their relationship.