

**You
can
talk
to
me**

communicating with your child

crisispregnancyagency
Formulating and Implementing a National Strategy





This booklet is designed to complement the "You can talk to me" DVD and has been developed by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency to assist parents in communicating with their children on sexual health and relationships.

This resource is for parents, step-parents, foster parents, guardians or carers of children aged primarily between 11 and 15. The word 'parents' is used in this booklet to refer to all these individuals. There are many different types of families from varied religious and ethnic communities and backgrounds.

What parents find useful in this resource may differ from parent to parent and family to family depending on personal, moral or religious views.

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*Co-produced with NHS Health Scotland.



For further information on Healthy Respect, please visit www.healthy-respect.com

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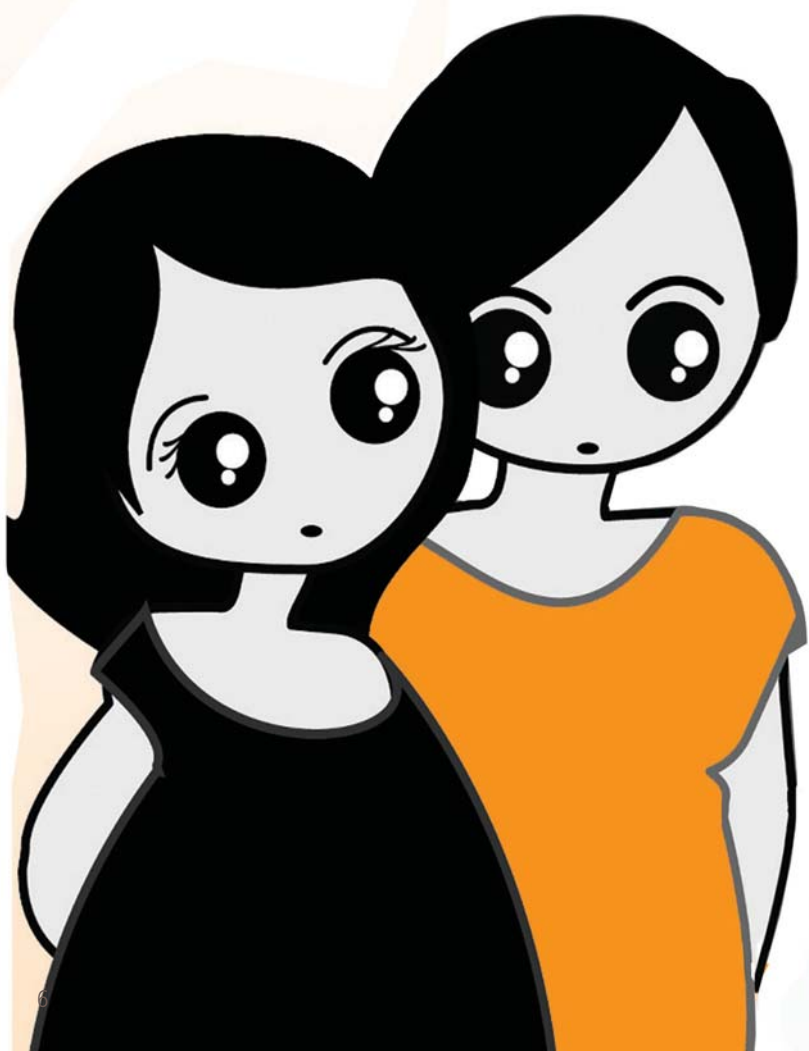
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Introduction

In this section we will discuss the following:

Talking to your child
- Dr. Marie Murray

Being there for your child
- Dr. Tony Bates

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Talking to your child

- Dr. Marie Murray

What is it that makes the conversation between parents and young people about sex so different to every other conversation. So different, that many people think it must happen on a particular day at a particular age?

We don't have the 'crossing the road talk' or whisper with embarrassment "any worries you have about crossing the road, don't be afraid to ask me". No, right from the start we hold their hands because they are too young to understand the danger of passing cars. All through their lives we guide our children and direct them, from toddler to teenager, pedestrian to biker, to rider of bus and driver of car. We show them, by example, the respect that traffic requires.

**Why can't
talking about
'sex' and
'sexuality' be
the same?**



One of the difficulties, perhaps, is that neither parents nor adolescents ever want to think of each other as sexual beings. Adolescents shiver at the thought of their parents having sex. Parents are long since past that!

Parents are equally squeamish. This is the one conversation that they do not know how to begin. They might lack the words to have a comfortable parent-child chat.



This is why the unsaid often becomes the 'badly said', so that phrases like "behave yourself" or "don't get into trouble" become negative and insulting warnings to young people who are already sensitive and uncertain about how to cope. Warnings of this kind assume that the adolescent either already has had sex or is about to start, unless warned of the dangers of pregnancy. This provides no information, no guidelines, no support and a clear message that pregnancy is the only danger in sex.



The unsaid often becomes the 'badly said'

Sex education is not just learning about quick physical acts but about lifelong emotional development, intimate relationships and commitments.

Sex education is about parents being there for adolescents and communicating the true meaning of relationships and sexuality. This is done in the way each parent treats the other and treats young people. It is spoken loudly without words when a father and mother are respectful of each other, are protective and supportive of their son or daughter and challenge inappropriate messages or images about sex.

Sex education is when a parent reminds children who come across certain images on a billboard, on TV, in an advertisement or on the internet that 'relationships' are different to that image. It is shown by how parents talk to each other, talk about each other, talk to and about their children. It is in the films parents watch and allow their family to see.

Sex education says this is how to be a man or a woman in the world. It acknowledges the adolescent stage of life because adolescents are hurt if their transition from childhood is put down or trivialised. Adolescents are sensitive if their manner of dress is ridiculed, if they are accused of doing what they would not do or if they are described in a way that is sexual, offensive or degrading.

We have no idea of what it is like to be an adolescent in the world of today.

Our experiences are not their experiences. We cannot begin any conversation with adolescents unless we realise how much life for them is different from when we were their age and that we can never understand what it is like to be growing up today. The greatest wish most young people express is a wish for respect. They have the right to respect for their youth, respect for their views, respect for what they know and for what they have yet to learn and to be asked what information or support they require at different ages and stages in life.

The adolescent's job is to strive for an independent experience of the world. The parents' job is to keep adolescents safe while they do this. Sometimes adolescents have the skills they need. Sometimes parents must make decisions. Sometimes they can make these decisions together.





Parents guide their children every day in many ways. Sex education is no different. Parents need to trust themselves, tap into their own intuition, value their own knowledge and appreciate their unique sensitivity to their own child.

Sometimes things go wrong, this may require a review of the rules and the adolescent's readiness for responsibility. Because at heart, young people rightly require the regard for their safety that makes rules, draws boundaries, that does not facilitate them engaging in activities they will later regret, and that guides them, not criticises them, particularly if they make mistakes.

It is difficult for things to go wrong when the message to young people is one of love, respect and the wish to keep them safe. How parents communicate and carry out this role with their own children is not contained in a 'talk' but in living. Parents know how to do this.

The rest will follow.



Being there for your child

- Dr. Tony Bates

Bringing children into this life and helping them to find their place in this world is a courageous undertaking.



dreams

fears

**What it
means to be a
boy or a girl**

As a parent, you want your child's path to be as smooth as possible and to do all you can to spare him or her needless suffering.

Listening to them talk about their joys and failures, their fears and their dreams, what confuses and bothers them, is a vital part of parenting your child. Simply being there for them in those moments when they want to chat about what's going on helps keep them safe in the world.

Coming to terms with sexuality is one of the main issues facing your child. Your son or daughter needs to gradually figure out what it means to be a boy or a girl. With that comes the awareness of their need to be close to others, to build friendships and to learn to be intimate. Looking back on your own life, you can see that this learning happens gradually over time.

**“ My parents didn't sit down and talk
to me about sex - I wish they had though ”**

- Roberta, age 15



From the first moment you were welcomed and cared for in life, you began learning how to get close and how to avoid getting hurt. Later on, you became aware of yourself as an individual; how you looked, what you liked and didn't like, the kinds of people you were drawn to and the insecurities you felt around others. With guidance, or perhaps with little or no support, you wove these ideas together into a picture of who you are. And it is no different for your child. The only question is, do we leave our children alone to do this work, or do we believe we might have something to offer that may make a difference to them?

**You Can Talk to Me
is a resource that
believes very strongly in
what you have to
offer your child, particularly
in respect to your
child's understanding of
their sexuality.**



The world they live in gives them very mixed messages about how they should feel and behave as young men and women. They are told their natural desires should be expressed, that it's 'cool' to experiment, regardless of their readiness to do so. Mixed messages from peers, the media and with what children think can lead to great confusion and to behaviour they may deeply regret.



Your contribution to their growing understanding is different to any other 'voice' they are exposed to.

You know them personally; you know what they are ready to hear, at any given point in time. In your conversations with them, you give them more than mere information. You help them to fit this information to their lives, to their particular worries and questions that are part of their growing awareness of themselves as sexual beings.

What makes it so hard to open up a discussion about sex with your child? Could it be we're afraid we'll get it wrong? After all, we know this is very important and we wouldn't want to frighten, confuse or shame them. One of the real difficulties for us as parents may be that we have our own memories of how our parents talked to us. That is, if they even tried to. We remember, perhaps, our own embarrassment and sense of cringing, as we were given little booklets to read, or spoken to about sex in such a basic, childish way that we felt deeply uncomfortable.

Some parents now fear that by talking about sex, we may unintentionally encourage our children to engage in sexual behaviour, before they are emotionally ready. By thinking like this they are actually handing their role as parents over to the media, their children's peers, the internet and all the other information systems that have no problem with bombarding children with information and images of a sexual nature on a daily basis.



We don't want to set them on the wrong track, so we play it safe and say nothing. We hope that they will come to sexual knowledge in their own time, in their own way, and when they are ready.



This Resource suggests an approach to communicating that takes some pressure off all concerned. It describes a way of talking to your child throughout the course of their childhood and adolescence. Conversations about sex can begin as soon as their curiosity triggers questions about their own birth or the arrival of newborns into their world. At each point in their development, new opportunities present themselves to add a little more to their understanding of sexual relations.

Rather than feel the subject must be raised in some very formal way, it is easier for you and your child if you allow it to surface naturally and communicate to them that this is a very normal aspect of life. Sex is part of a much larger adventure in forming and growing relationships, and yet we know there are significant hazards in moving too early into sexual intimacy. Healthy sexuality has to do with something that happens between two people, where there is commitment and where both people are emotionally ready to handle the enormous feelings which intimacy uncovers.

Since sexuality is such a powerful gift for deepening the bond between two people, it makes sense that we regard it with some respect. As a parent your courage in confronting this topic can communicate both the wonder of sexuality and the basic right of your child to say "no", until the conditions are right for them to engage in sexual intimacy.

“ It's not something you do in one day, ”
it's something you do everyday.

- Dr Tony Bates



Teenagers and parents

In this section we will discuss the following:

Worries that young people might have about the physical and emotional changes they are going through

How to reassure your child that their fears and anxieties are normal

Talking to your child about difficult issues such as mood swings, periods, unexpected erections and wet dreams

The media and its influence over your child

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Young people's worries

Puberty is a time of great change for a young person and often one that is characterised by worry and uncertainty. Young people can worry about the emotional and physical changes they are going through. "Why am I taller, shorter, spottier than the others in my class!?! " You can help with these worries by responding in the following ways.



Is this normal? Reassure your child that they are normal, and offer them support. Changes don't happen all at once – most of them happen slowly over a few years. Changes happen at different ages and in different stages for different people.

Encourage them to ask questions and share their feelings about what's happening to their body. It is really important to assure your child that the changes they are going through are normal. Explain how everyone is not the same, and that's normal in itself.

Mood swings Pay attention to your child's feelings and encourage them to talk about them and say what they feel. Explain that these feelings are a natural part of growing up. It can help them learn to accept that all feelings are natural, even uncomfortable ones. Sometimes, just letting your child know that you have noticed their feelings without trying to change how they feel can help them feel better.

Extreme moods, which range from being tearful to being aggressive, are common, and can be caused by a combination of hormonal change, pressure and stress



Unexpected erections and wet dreams

Tell your son about unexpected erections and wet dreams before he has them. Reassure him that they are nothing to be worried or ashamed about. They are a natural part of growing up.

Unexpected erections and wet dreams are likely to start happening to boys between the ages of 10 and 13.

Tell your son that unexpected erections and wet dreams happen to most boys and men. Suggest tips for dealing with unexpected erections, for example, thinking about something else. Give him practical tips to avoid embarrassment, such as putting underpants, bedding and so on in the laundry.

It is a good idea to discuss periods with boys and unexpected erections and wet dreams with girls so they can understand what is going on for the opposite sex. This may help young people feel less embarrassed about the changes they are going through themselves.

Periods

Give your daughter all the practical information she needs to help her deal with her period, long before she has her first one. Periods usually start around 12 years old. Evidence shows that girls are starting their periods at a younger age - even as young as nine - so make sure you prepare your daughter early enough. Have a supply of pads (sanitary towels) or tampons ready to show her and describe how to use them.

Understanding the media: Navigating the sea of voices

A great concern for many parents is the amount of sex and sexual references that are to be found in the media. Research from a number of countries shows that up to 50% of all programming contains scenes of a sexual nature – something that causes worry for a lot of parents.

The media and the world at large give a lot of messages about sexuality, but only the parent knows how their child really feels inside and can connect to them as a person.



Young people report that while they do learn a great deal about sexuality from television they would much rather learn about sex from their parents, schools and the people in their immediate environment. Having a friendly voice to explain the mixed signals they receive from television will prevent them from picking up incorrect information or drawing the wrong conclusions.

Far from being something to be concerned about, parents can use the media as a tool to teach children. Remember that while young people will get information about sex from the media, their attitudes and values are much more influenced by parents and their immediate environment.

“ Young people are very sophisticated in terms of how they read TV and are very clued in to the conventions and codes that TV uses - particularly in relation to sex. ”

- Dr. Carol MacKeogh

If your child has a physical or learning disability



Parents whose children have learning or physical disabilities may require more specialised supports and information around sex education. It is important not to overlook this issue, even though your child may be developing at a different rate than their peers or siblings. You know your child best and the type of information that is appropriate and relevant for them. However, many of the issues discussed in this booklet will still be important for you, your family and your child.

Further information and supports are available from some of the agencies listed in the General Information section of this booklet.

Questions about sexuality

Sexual orientation is an issue that may emerge in some families during the teen years. Children might have questions regarding terms or phrases they hear from peers or the media relating to sexuality. Parents can panic when they hear the words lesbian or gay from their child. Concerns about sexuality can be confusing and isolating for both children and parents alike. It is important for lesbian, gay and bisexual young people that their sexual identity is accepted and affirmed by their parents in order for them to develop positively as a whole person.

Information and further supports can be found in the General Information section of this booklet.

“ There’s something liberating about knowing who you are. Being content with who you are makes a big difference in who you become. ”

- Dillon age 17



Communication

In this section we will discuss the following:

Tips on how to start a conversation with your child about sex

Effective communication with your child or teenager

Ways to approach the conversation

The best time and place to talk to your child

The different approaches to communication

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Starting - Opening up a conversation

Getting off to a good start is half the battle with a teenager. You know your child. You know the times when both of you are more likely to be relaxed together and when you could gently raise a sensitive topic.

Maybe driving them home from shopping, or maybe dropping them off to a friend. Find a time when you're unlikely to be interrupted and where you both feel reasonably comfortable. Sometimes it may not be a matter of setting up a scene where conversation is possible as much as spotting a good moment and taking advantage of it.

Building towards a talk about sex means you don't necessarily dive in at the deep end. It's often a good idea to start a conversation with something that's important in their life. It's important to start with a comment that sounds positive, not critical.



- What's happening that's important lately?
- What have they been doing that has impressed you lately?
- The way they reacted to a problem in their friend's life; or perhaps the way they were able to deal with a problem at school.

“ At home it was more about the feelings you feel towards someone and how your emotions develop. Whereas in school it was more diagrams and that sort of thing. ”

- Tom aged 18

Everyday events can provide an easy opening to the topic of sexuality. What about that story on TV? What did they make of all the commotion about that young girl who got so upset about being pressured by her boyfriend? Or what about a family relative who has just announced they're expecting a child.

How did that happen?

Don't be afraid to talk about your own sense of confusion when you were a child and heard about these things. It may help a teenager to know that you were a teenager once. You also struggled with trying to be cool, even though inside you were terrified. Showing that you're human makes them feel more at ease and gets them interested in learning how you coped, possibly with only minimal support.



You don't have to have the perfect sex education to be effective in talking to your child about it. Life is a learning process. Valuable lessons can be learnt from both good and bad experiences - the important thing is to pass on that knowledge to your child.

So you've set the scene, you've taken the plunge and you've established in their mind that sex is important and that it wasn't always an easy issue for you. **What next?**

Building

Start as you mean to continue

Your first conversations with your children about sex and sexual matters will set the tone for future discussions.

Children, whatever their age, will ask questions about relationships and sex. These questions can be answered in many different ways - the important thing is to always be honest and open with your child. Ideally you should start talking to your children about sexuality from an early age when they begin to ask questions. But don't worry if you haven't talked to them about sex since they were young, you can start now.



Sex education is not just about penises and vaginas (the biology of male and females); it is also about relationships, emotions and feelings. Talking and listening to your child will encourage them to understand sex and relationships and to develop the skills and attitudes they need to feel happy and supported in who they are.

Young people need to feel that you trust them and value their opinions. If you do not listen to them, you cannot expect them to listen to you.

“ It's only basic that you should be able to talk to your parents above anyone else about whatever you want ”

- Joan aged 18

Listening and respect

Tips for effective communication



- Be honest and open at all times. But you don't have to answer more than your child asks.
- If you don't know the answer to a question say so. When you don't know the answer try to find out after the discussion. Make sure you tell your child what you find out.
- Don't try to hide shock or embarrassment. Both parents and children may be shocked or embarrassed by some issues raised during a discussion about sex. The important thing is to remain open about your feelings.
- Tell them you are always happy to answer their questions. Mention this again to them sometime after the conversation.
- Be sure to ask questions as much as you are asked.
- Listening is a key part of communication. This way you can find out what your child knows and correct anything that they have misunderstood.
- If your child asks an awkward question in public, don't criticise them. Just say that it's an interesting question, and one that you should discuss when you get home. Be sure to follow up on it when you return home.
- Have books or leaflets for your child to read, or for you to look at together.

Relationships

Creating an atmosphere of communication

Communicating about sex and relationships will give your child the knowledge and tools to make judgements for him or herself. Talking to children about these things is not just about having one conversation that will explain everything – it is about creating an atmosphere where your child can approach you about any matters that they are curious about or that are worrying them.

Research has shown that children who have discussed relationships with their parents from a young age are more likely to wait until they are older before having sex.

Responding

How should you answer questions?

Children begin asking questions from an early age: "Where did I come from?," "How are babies born?" "Why are boys and girls different?" As your child grows, their questions will become more specific.

Remember when answering questions:

- Don't assume anything - be sure to ask questions as to what they already know before answering.
- The question your child asks may not always be the one that is really on their mind. Sometimes they will test the water with a similar or related question. Listen carefully to all questions your child asks.
- The way you answer a question will depend on your child's age and stage of development - you know your child best; your answer should be suited to their needs and level of development.

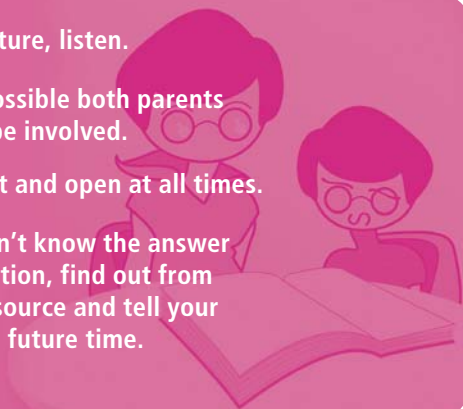


Conclusion



- Children want to learn about sex and relationships from their parents.
- **Parents are the first and primary teacher of their child.**
- If you don't talk about sex with your children, you're giving out the wrong messages about it!
- **Talking to children about sex DOES NOT MEAN that you are encouraging them to have sex.**
- Young people who discuss sex and relationships with their parents are more likely to delay when they first have sex and they are more likely to use contraception when they choose to have sex.

- **Don't lecture, listen.**
- **Where possible both parents need to be involved.**
- **Be honest and open at all times.**
- **If you don't know the answer to a question, find out from another source and tell your child at a future time.**





SEX

relationships

periods

STIS

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General Information

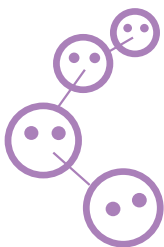
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STIs



STIs (sexually transmitted infections) are infections that are passed from one person to another through intimate, sexual contact. STIs consist of a range of infections, including viral and bacterial infections. Some have symptoms and some may not. However, early diagnosis of STIs is vital to prevent potential long-term medical complications including infertility and ectopic pregnancy.

The number of reported STIs has doubled in Ireland in the last five years, so it is important that you and your children have knowledge and information on this topic.

All STIs are treatable, but not all are curable and some, including HIV, can be fatal. The sooner a STI is diagnosed and treated, the better to avoid long-term health complications.

Symptoms of STIs can include:



Early diagnosis of STIs is vital to prevent potential long-term medical complications.

- Unusual vaginal discharge or bleeding between menstrual periods
- Unusual discharge from the penis
- Pain, especially when urinating
- Itching, bumps, rash or sores in the genital area

Or there may be no symptoms at all.



- **Genital warts:** This is the most common STI in Ireland today. The infection is caused by a virus. The warts can be treated by special prescribed creams or by cryotherapy (freezing). Genital warts are highly contagious and can be treated but not cured, so they may return repeatedly.
- **Chlamydia:** This is a bacterial infection that is treated by a course of antibiotics. Most people infected with chlamydia have no symptoms, but can be diagnosed by a swab or urine test. If left untreated, it can cause pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility in men and women.
- **HIV:** HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus and is the virus that causes AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). There is currently no vaccine to prevent HIV infection. The sole way to prevent HIV infection is to avoid activities that put a person at risk of infection, such as sharing injection needles or having sex with an infected person.
- **Other STIs include:** Genital herpes, Gonorrhoea, Hepatitis B and Syphilis.



Treatment in a Sexually Transmitted Infection or Genito Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinic is confidential, free and non-judgemental.

Any medication or treatment is also provided free of charge. For a clinic near you call the Drugs/HIV Helpline on: **1800 459 459.**

Condoms, when used correctly and consistently, offer the best protection from most STIs, including HIV. However, no method of contraception can provide 100% protection from STIs or pregnancy.

Age of consent

In Ireland anyone of either sex who is under the age of seventeen is not deemed old enough to give consent to sexual intercourse.

Helpful websites

www.crisispregnacy.ie

Crisis Pregnancy Agency

A source of information, research and links.

www.positiveoptions.ie

Positive Options is a directory of agencies skilled in the area of crisis pregnancy.

www.thinkcontraception.ie

A source of information for men and women living in Ireland who want to learn more about their sexual and reproductive health, especially contraception.

www.cluedup.ie

www.nehb.ie/youthhealthne

Websites for young people primarily aged between 16-24 developed by regional Health Boards and aimed at providing information and support on all aspects of sexual health.

If you would like to order the DVD that accompanies this booklet please call or email:

Crisis Pregnancy Agency
(01) 8146292
info@crisispregnancy.ie



Agencies & supports

PARENTLINE

Carmichael House,
North Brunswick St., Dublin 7

i Lo-Call: 1850 927 277
www.parentline.ie

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

Head Office, Marlborough St.,
Dublin 1

i Call: 01 889 6400
www.education.ie

DRUGS/HIV HELPLINE

A free, confidential helpline on
issues relating to sexual health,
drug misuse and HIV

i Freephone: 1800 459 459

CHILDLINE IRELAND

c/o ISPCC, 20 Molesworth St., Dublin 2

i Freephone
Helpline: 1800 666 666
www.ispcc.ie

PARENTS' SUPPORT

For information and support
if your child is gay or lesbian.

i Call: 01 872 1055
www.gayswitchboard.ie

BELONG TO

Support for lesbian and gay young
people

i Call: 01 8773 4184
www.belongto.org

NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL OF IRELAND

3 Montague St., Dublin 2

i Call: 01 478 4122
www.youth.ie

NATIONAL PARENTS COUNCIL (PRIMARY)

12 Marlborough Court, Dublin 1

i Helpline: 01 887 4477
01 887 4034
www.npc.ie

NATIONAL PARENTS COUNCIL (POST PRIMARY)

Unit 5, Glasnevin Business Centre,
Ballyboggan Road, Dublin 11

i Call: 01 830 2740/ 830 2747
www.npcpp.ie

CARI

For children, families & groups
affected by sexual abuse

110 Lower Drumcondra Rd., Dublin 9

i Lo Call Helpline:
1890 924 567

HEALTH PROMOTION UNIT

Department of Health & Children,
Hawkins Hse., Hawkins St., Dublin 2

i Call: 01 635 4000
www.healthpromotion.ie

