The program begins by asking a tricky question: Am I ready for sex? A series of real teens share their opinions. Then the hosts point out that the decision to become sexually active is important and carries serious consequences. The male host explains that before someone can decide if he or she is ready for sex, he/she must first address a number of other questions. Finally, they note that there is no one accepted definition of “sex” or “sexually active.” In this program, “sex” means any sexual behavior that can lead to a pregnancy or an STI.

The first question to consider is, “Why am I thinking about having sex?” The hosts introduce the topic of sexual pressure from outside sources, beginning with media pressure. The teens note that media portrayals show sex as something casual and common among young people. Next, we meet Dr. Elizabeth Casparian, executive director of the adolescent sexuality education program HiTOPS in Princeton, NJ. She explains, “The messages that they’re getting from TV and the internet is that everyone’s doing it...when we know that’s not happening.” Viewers learn that more than half of high school students have not yet had sex. What’s more, sex in the media is nothing like sex in real life. Fictional characters don’t have to worry about the real consequences of sex—but real teens do. “I’ve never heard a TV show talk about STIs,” notes one teen.

Peers can also be a significant source of sexual pressure. The young people describe wanting to chime in when friends talk about sex or wanting to fit in with what their friends were doing. Teens are reminded that just because peers are talking about sex doesn’t mean they are actually sexually active. A young woman reassures viewers that there’s no way they are the only virgins left in school; Dr. Casparian adds that it’s important for teens to make decisions based on what’s right for them, not on what others say they are doing.

Dating partners can also put pressure on each other to have sex. Sometimes this can occur because teens—often guys—get the message that they are “supposed” to have sex. Dr. Casparian emphasizes the qualities of a healthy relationship: equality, having the right to one’s own opinions, being valued, respect, communication and no pressure. One teen shares that she lost her virginity because her boyfriend pressured her into it: “Looking back, it wasn’t my decision. It was his decision.” Viewers see the next “red flag:” You’re not ready if you don’t know how to say no to your partner. Finally, the experts and hosts explain that what teens really want is intimacy, not sex.

The program moves on to the next big question: “What are my sexual values?” Viewers learn that values—or strong personal beliefs about right and wrong—are very important in all decision-making. The teens share some of their sexual values, including the importance of commitment, communication or being in love. The hosts review some unhealthy reasons to become sexually active: I don’t want to be the only virgin left in school, I just want to get it over with, my partner will break up with me if I don’t, I want to feel like I’m an adult, I’m
really curious, and it’s what couples do. Next, they review healthy reasons to wait: I’m waiting for a committed relationship, it’s against my personal values, I haven’t found the right person yet, I don’t want to get an STI, I don’t want to get pregnant, and I’m just not ready yet.

The hosts emphasize that alcohol or drugs can interfere with personal values by contributing to high-risk behaviors. A young woman shares that she lost her virginity when she was drunk and “regretted it almost immediately.”

Next, the program tackles, “Do I have the right partner?” Viewers learn that in a healthy relationship, partners must be able to communicate clearly about sex. “They really do need to face the issues head-on,” notes Dr. Casparian. Several teens acknowledge that talking about sex can be awkward, but that it’s an essential conversation to have. Next, the program discusses how sex can change a relationship. While taking a relationship to a sexual level can sometimes bring people closer, it can also affect the relationship negatively. One young man counsels viewers to think about they would feel if the relationship ended before having sex.

The next question is, “What if I’m not ready?” For teens that have considered the first several factors and decided they’re not yet prepared for sex, assertive communication is essential. Dr. Casparian explains that many teens give in to sexual pressure because they lack the skills for standing up for their own beliefs. One teen recommends being straightforward about one’s boundaries with a partner. “It’s your body and you have to take care of it, and don’t ever let anyone else tell you what to do,” notes another. The teens review several ways to say no to sex: I want to wait a few months before we go there, I want to wait until I’m older, I want to wait until I’m married, I don’t want to risk getting pregnant or getting an STI, my parents would kill me, and I’m just not ready yet.

The program then turns to the final question: “How will I protect myself?” If teens have thought about all the factors already discussed and decide they are truly ready, they still must make a plan for preventing pregnancy and STIs. A young woman provides a summary: “You need to know your partners, limit your partners, use a condom correctly every time and make all your decisions sober.” Teens are advised to talk about birth control options with a partner well before having sex.

Unplanned pregnancy is the first major risk of sexual activity. Dr. Casparian notes that no method of contraception is 100% effective at preventing pregnancy. The hosts explain that a pregnancy occurs when a male sperm fertilizes a female egg. Several types of birth
control are reviewed, including hormonal and barrier methods. Another red flag is, “You’re not ready if you’re too embarrassed to talk to your partner about birth control.”

The other major risk of sexual activity is contracting an STI. Ivy Pearlstein, director of an adolescent health center, tells viewers that STIs are very widespread among teens and can be transmitted through vaginal, anal and oral sex. She also warns teens that in many cases, it’s possible to be infected with an STI and not have any symptoms—and then transmit it to a partner. Viewers learn that some STIs can be treated, but if prompt medical care is not given, they can progress into much more serious health problems. If someone has been sexually active, getting tested for STIs is the only way to know for sure if he or she is infected. “Using condoms is another essential part of reducing your risk,” says the host. The teens explain that condoms are the only methods of birth control that provide protection against STIs.

Finally, the hosts review the important questions to ask oneself before making any decisions about sex. The teens wrap up the program with final thoughts. “If you’re confident in yourself without being sexually active, I think that’s great,” says one. “If you’re not ready, you can always wait,” says another. The program ends with “Stick with your morals and your values. If you’re not ready for sex yet, don’t do it.”
The video and print materials in *Am I Ready? Making Healthy Sexual Decisions* are compatible with the Performance Indicators of the National Health Education Standards (grades 9 - 12) as indicated below.

**National Health Education Standard 1:** *Students will comprehend concepts related to health promotion and disease prevention to enhance health.*

**Performance indicators for grades 9 - 12**

1.12.1 Predict how healthy behaviors can affect health status.
1.12.2 Describe the interrelationships of emotional, intellectual, physical, and social health.
1.12.3 Analyze how environment and personal health are interrelated.
1.12.7 Compare and contrast the benefits of and barriers to practicing a variety of healthy behaviors.
1.12.8 Analyze personal susceptibility to injury, illness, or death if engaging in unhealthy behaviors.
1.12.9 Analyze the potential severity of injury or illness if engaging in unhealthy behaviors.

**National Health Education Standard 2:** *Students will analyze the influence of family, peers, culture, media, technology, and other factors on health behaviors.*

**Performance indicators for grades 9 - 12**

2.12.2 Analyze how the culture supports and challenges health beliefs, practices, and behaviors.
2.12.3 Analyze how peers influence healthy and unhealthy behaviors.
2.12.4 Evaluate how the school and community can affect personal health practice and behaviors.
2.12.5 Evaluate the effect of media on personal and family health.
2.12.7 Analyze how the perceptions of norms influence healthy and unhealthy behaviors.
2.12.8 Analyze the influence of personal values and beliefs on individual health practices and behaviors.
2.12.9 Analyze how some health risk behaviors can influence the likelihood of engaging in unhealthy behaviors.

**National Health Education Standard 3:** *Students will demonstrate the ability to access valid information, products, and services to enhance health.*

**Performance indicators for grades 9 - 12**

3.12.2 Use resources from home, school, and community that provide valid health information.
3.12.3 Determine the accessibility of products and services that enhance health.
3.12.4 Determine when professional health services may be required.
3.12.5 Access valid and reliable health products and services.

**National Health Education Standard 4:** *Students will demonstrate the ability to use interpersonal communication skills to enhance health and avoid or reduce health risks.*

**Performance indicators for grades 9 - 12**

4.12.1 Use skills for communicating effectively with family, peers, and others to enhance health.
4.12.2 Demonstrate refusal, negotiation, and collaboration skills to enhance health and avoid or reduce health risks.
4.12.4 Demonstrate how to ask for and offer assistance to enhance the health of self and others.
National Health Education Standard 5: Students will demonstrate the ability to use decision-making skills to enhance health.

Performance indicators for grades 9 - 12
5.12.1 Examine barriers that can hinder healthy decision making.
5.12.2 Determine the value of applying a thoughtful decision-making process in health-related situations.
5.12.3 Justify when individual or collaborative decision making is appropriate.
5.12.4 Generate alternatives to health-related issues or problems.
5.12.5 Predict the potential short-term and long-term impact of each alternative on self and others.
5.12.6 Defend the healthy choice when making decisions.
5.12.7 Evaluate the effectiveness of health-related decisions.

National Health Education Standard 6: Students will demonstrate the ability to use goal-setting skills to enhance health.

Performance indicators for grades 9 - 12
6.12.1 Assess personal health practices and overall health status.
6.12.2 Develop a plan to attain a personal health goal that addresses strengths, needs, and risks.

National Health Education Standard 7: Students will demonstrate the ability to practice health-enhancing behaviors and avoid or reduce health risks.

Performance indicators for grades 9 - 12
7.12.1 Analyze the role of individual responsibility for enhancing health.
7.12.2 Demonstrate a variety of healthy practices and behaviors that will maintain or improve the health of self and others.
7.12.3 Demonstrate a variety of behaviors to avoid or reduce health risks to self and others.

National Health Education Standard 8: Students will demonstrate the ability to advocate for personal, family, and community health.

Performance indicators for grades 9 - 12
8.12.1 Utilize accurate peer and societal norms to formulate a health-enhancing message.
8.12.3 Work cooperatively as an advocate for improving personal, family, and community health.