

Talking with Your Child about Sexuality

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Parenting involves teaching children to maintain a safe and healthy lifestyle, which includes healthy sexual development. It is an important parenting responsibility to talk to your children about sex, sexuality, and related topics. As a parent, you can communicate with your child to help them understand topics related to sexuality starting when they are very young and throughout their lives.

Don't Dread the Talk

Talking to children about sexuality is an important, but challenging, conversation to have. Some parents feel uncomfortable or embarrassed talking about sex and sexuality. Other parents think that talking with a child about sex may encourage a child to experiment. Still others avoid or postpone the discussion believing that talking with a child does not make a difference. However, you do make a difference when you talk to your kids about sex. Teens who have grown up having positive conversations with their parents about sex are more likely to delay sexual activity, have fewer partners, and

use condoms and other forms of birth control when they do have sex. Oftentimes, other sources of information – such as television, magazines, music, print advertisements, other children, and the Internet – provide false, inappropriate, and unrealistic information. By not talking with your children, these untrustworthy sources may encourage and validate behaviors and beliefs that are very different from your own. Make it your goal to be your child's primary source of sexual information or seek a professional's help if you are not comfortable talking about the subject.



Benefits of Talking to Kids about Sex and Sexuality

- Builds a trusting relationship between you and your child
- Protects children from sexual abuse, as well as from becoming an abuser
- Develops a child's positive view of sexuality and loving relationships
- Clarifies family values, beliefs, and understanding
- Contributes to positive self-esteem, self-confidence, and body image
- Reinforces that actions have outcomes and consequences
- Helps children cope with and understand peer pressure
- Sets a foundation for strong, healthy, and loving relationships
- Heightens awareness about sexual risks

10 Tips to Talk to Kids about Sex and Sexuality:

The following tips help parents prepare to initiate conversations about sex and sexuality and answer commonly asked questions.

1. Start the conversation early. Talking with children about sexuality is a lifelong conversation, but it is best to start the conversation early. Beginning in infancy, young children become curious about their bodies and begin picking up on relationship dynamics. Teaching them the correct names of body parts and why boys and girls look different is a natural conversation that can help build a respectful and trusting long-term relationship. By starting these conversations at a young age, you are encouraging your child to talk and ask questions well into their future.

2. Use age-appropriate language, including real terms. Providing children with age-appropriate information and language makes it easier for them to understand that sex and sexuality are natural parts of human and emotional development. It also makes it easier to talk about the more complicated aspects of sexual intimacy as kids grow older. Using silly or cute words in exchange for anatomically correct words is not appropriate at any age as it gives the impression that there is

something wrong or offensive about the actual name and function of a body part.

3. Have more than one conversation. One conversation about sexuality, relationships, and sexual development is not enough. It is better to talk about sex and the many related topics a little at a time to help prevent children and teens from being overwhelmed. If you haven't started talking with your child about sexuality yet, it is never too late. Just don't try to "catch up" all at once.

4. Be available to listen. Listening to your child shows them that you are interested in and respect what they have to say. You may not always agree with what you hear, but it is important to pay attention to what your child says and to maintain a calm, non-critical atmosphere. Try not to act surprised, shocked, or embarrassed at a comment or question as this might give the child the impression that it is bad or wrong to talk about sexuality. Instead, have a calm conversation and openly and honestly answer any questions.

5. Be prepared to answer questions. Children may ask questions about sex and sexuality out of curiosity, because they need reassurance or help making a decision. If your child asks you a question, avoid overwhelming them with

information that they did not ask for. Instead, ask if you answered their question and if there is anything else they would like to know. Don't worry - there may be instances where you don't know an answer or feel uncomfortable. This is normal! Use this scenario to seek out the information together in books, online, or by asking others. Through this process, you can learn together and help to build a respectful, trusting relationship with your child.

Common questions children and teens may ask:

- Where do babies come from?
- Why do I have a penis or vagina and you don't?
- Is it okay to touch yourself?
- Do boys have periods?
- How do you know when puberty is over?
- What does gay or LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) mean?
- Is it true that a girl cannot get pregnant the first time she has sex?
- Should people have sex if they are in love?
- What does it feel like when you lose your virginity?

6. Take advantage of teachable moments. If you don't know how to start or carry on a conversation or your child is not asking questions about sex, look for teachable moments. For example, bath time is an

Age-appropriate Topics Regarding Sexuality

Young Children (0-6 years)

- Appropriate names for body parts
- Good touch vs. bad touch
- Differences between boys and girls
- Where babies come from and how they are born

Middle Childhood and Preteens (7-12 years)

- What happens during puberty
- Expectations for dating and crushes
- Body image, self-esteem, and peer pressure
- Sexual orientation, including heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality
- Sexual intercourse and pregnancy

Teenagers (13+ years)

- Safety and responsibility in relationships and sexual behaviors
- Rape, date rape, drinking/drugs, accepting rides and going to private places with strangers and/or acquaintances
- Abstinence and the various types of birth control
- Values and expectations for relationships and sex
- Other forms of sexual behavior, including oral sex and masturbation

excellent way to teach very young children the proper names for body parts. A neighbor's pregnancy can instigate conversations about where babies come from. It is also helpful to use a favorite television or book character experiencing puberty or a relationship issue as an opportunity to talk about sexual development with a preteen or teenager. Using everyday situations can help you better communicate and relate to your child.

7. Talk about values and beliefs. There are many feelings associated with sexuality that a parent and child should discuss. Scare tactics and worst-case scenarios about sex are not effective approaches. But it is appropriate to be open in sharing your values and concerns relating sex to love, intimacy, caring, and respect for oneself and one's partner. Your child will be better informed to make positive decisions and resist peer

pressure in future relationships. Even though children will develop their own beliefs and values over time, it is the parents who lay the groundwork.

8. Talk about choices, responsibilities, and consequences. Seventy percent of teens have had intercourse by the time they are 19 years old. It is important that children and teens understand that their choices regarding sexual activity come with responsibilities and consequences. Talk with them about the risks for pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). By talking with your child before they become sexually active, your child is more likely to make smarter, more responsible choices and informed decisions.

9. Keep up with the times. Children are constantly learning and observing from the world around them. To best maintain conversations, you must keep up with the times. There is a chance, for example, that parents' and kids' definitions of sex differ. It's your job to stay one step ahead of your kids. That means knowing what's going on in your child's life and talking to him/her about it.

Where Do I Start?

Asking your child a question might be a great way for you to open up a conversation. Here are some ways to start a conversation with your child:

Young Children

- Do you know the names of all of your body parts?
- Our neighbor is pregnant; do you know what that means?

Preteens

- What have you heard about the changes that happen during puberty?
- What age do you think people should start dating? What do your friends think?
- What do you and your friends do when you go on dates?

Teenagers

- At what age do you think people are ready to have sex?
- Are there expectations for hugging or kissing when you go on dates?
- When do you think people are ready to be parents?

10. Be a positive role model. Parents are a child's biggest influencers. Children learn from what parents do and say—and through what they don't do and don't say. Therefore, parental behaviors should align with what you are teaching your child about sexuality and healthy relationships. Typically, children can become very confused when they see a parent behaving in a way that doesn't match up with family values and beliefs. Make it a goal to be a consistent, positive role model to a child.

Conclusion

By talking with your child about their sexuality, you are encouraging the development of healthy attitudes and responsible behaviors. By having open and frequent conversations, you can also ensure that your child is receiving accurate information. As children age, having a strong foundation of knowledge and moral principles can encourage safer-sex practices and can reduce the likelihood of possible consequences associated with being sexually active, including unplanned pregnancy and STDs.

Additional Resources

Agencies:

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

<http://www.glsen.org>

GLSEN seeks to develop school climates where difference is valued for creating a more vibrant and diverse community. The network welcomes any and all individuals as members, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, or occupation, who are committed to seeing this philosophy realized in schools.

Planned Parenthood

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

or 1-800-230-7526

Planned Parenthood delivers vital reproductive health care, sex education, and information to millions of women, men, and young people worldwide.

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)

(SIECUS)

<http://www.familiesare-talking.org>

or (212) 819-9770

SIECUS provides families, educators, and policymakers access to fact-based sexuality information through publications, websites, trainings, and myriad of other resources.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

<http://www.thenational-campaign.org>

The campaign strategizes to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy, especially among single, young adults.

Books:

How You Were Born,

By Joanna Cole

Intended for children ages 3 and up, this book uses photographs and straightforward text to describe how an egg cell grows into a baby and is eventually born.

When You Were Inside

Mommy, By Joanna Cole

Intended for children ages 2 and up, this is a great book for introducing children to the ideas of pregnancy and childbirth.

Keys to Your Child's

Healthy Sexuality,

By Chrystal De Freitas

This book offers parents advice on what children need to know about sex and how to talk to them about it.

From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children,

By Debra W. Hafner

This parenting guide offers a variety of techniques to talk with your children about their sexuality and your family values.

All about Sex: A Family Resource of Sex and Sexuality, By Planned Parenthood

This is a comprehensive sourcebook of sexual information and concerns for parents and teenagers.

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