

Promoting Positive Sexual Attitudes: Sex Education From Early to Late Childhood

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General Points:

- Giving advice and accurate information, and teaching your child to make wise choices, is one of your most important jobs as a parent.
- Be an “askable” parent by teaching your curious young children that it is always okay to ask questions, including those about sexually-related topics.
- Never laugh or giggle, even if the question is cute. Laughter may embarrass your child, even though that is not your intention.
- Know that it is okay for you to feel uncomfortable, or to not know the answer. Children don’t want you to be perfect, they just want you involved, honest, and listening
- See if your child wants or needs to know more. Follow up your answers with, “Does that answer your question?”
- Be prepared to repeat yourself in the future. Children learn through repetition, and they also mull over things and may re-approach you with the “same” question posed in a slightly different manner.
- Keep gender segregation out of your house! It is the job of both parents to teach children about sexuality, regardless of your child’s gender.
- Avoid limiting your child’s toys based on their gender. Children under age 3 years are generally clueless about gender anyway. It is perfectly okay for a preschool-aged boy to play with dolls, and a preschool-aged girl to play with trucks!

Early Childhood:

- Find “teachable moments” with young children, such as bath time, to talk about body parts.
- Teach children the correct names of their genitals: penis and scrotum for boys, and vulva for girls. Using “vagina” for girls is incorrect, as the vulva is the correct term for the entire female external genitalia. Making up silly names for body parts may give the idea that there is something bad about the proper name.
- Also teach your child which parts are private parts (“the parts covered by a bathing suit”)
- Erections are normal in young boys. Some young boys (including babies) have many, some have few, and both are normal. Don’t discourage an infant or toddler from touching his penis – he is not masturbating, but rather exploring his body.
- It is perfectly acceptable for preschool-aged children of different genders to bathe together. If they seem curious about the other’s genitalia, say “are you wondering how boys’ and girls’ bodies are different?” and then explain.

- It is natural for the preschool-aged child to be curious about their parents' bodies, and perfectly acceptable for them to see you nude. Certainly, if this makes the parent uncomfortable, then ask your child politely for privacy as you dress or bathe.
- Preschoolers delight in their own bodies, and most discover that touching or rubbing their own genitals feels good. This is perfectly normal. If they are doing this in a private place, simply ignore the behavior, or state that you will return when they are done. Don't embarrass or frighten the child! However, if it done in view of others or in public places, simply tell the child that "I know it feels good, but please only do it when you are alone in your room."
- It is also perfectly acceptable for preschool-aged children of similar ages to play "doctor". If you discover mixed gender playmates doing so, take a deep breath and stay calm!! Ask them to get dressed, then talk with them about boys' and girls' bodies, perhaps using a book to illustrate. Never shame them for being curious!
- However, it is never okay for young children to penetrate the vagina or rectum with fingers or objects. And it is never okay for children more than 2 to 3 years apart (such as a 7 year-old boy and a 4 year-old girl) to be playing doctor.
- Don't worry if you discover preschoolers of the same gender undressing and playing "doctor". This, again, represents curiosity, not sexual acting out, and does not indicate future homosexual orientation.
- Teach your preschooler that their body belongs to them. They have a right to decide whether another child may touch their body during a game. Teach them that it is NOT okay to hug or kiss someone if that person does not want you to do so.
- It is perfectly normal for preschoolers to want to marry their parents. In fact, many preschoolers become jealous when their parents are seen hugging or kissing. If a preschool-aged boy tells his mommy that he wants to marry her, simply reply "I love you a lot, but I'm already married to daddy. When you grow up, you'll fall in love and marry a terrific woman!"
- Discourage children from kissing adults in the same manner that adults kiss. Ask them to kiss you lightly on the lips, or on the cheek.
- It is perfectly normal for preschool-aged children to begin to ask where they came from. Ask them whether they mean "how they were born?" or "how are babies made?" Tell them that babies grow in a special place inside a mom called a uterus, just below her stomach. If they ask for more details, it is okay to tell them that "a man and a woman are needed to make a baby. Inside the woman is a tiny egg, and inside the man are tiny sperm. When the egg and sperm join together, a baby can start!"
- Teach preschoolers to come and tell you if ever any adult touches their body when they don't want to be touched, and to say "no" if they don't want to be touched in that manner.

Middle Childhood:

You know it's coming, that dreaded moment when your adorable, innocent, and curious school-aged boy or girl suddenly asks "where do babies come from?" Young school-aged children are learning from and giggling with their peers about "private parts", sharing "dirty jokes", and scanning dictionaries looking up taboo words. Asking about sex and how babies are made shouldn't be so surprising to parents, and yet most are caught off-guard.

Talking about sex and sexuality gives you a chance to share your values and beliefs with your child. Sometimes the topic or the questions may seem embarrassing, but your child needs to know there is always a reliable, honest source he or she can turn to for answers – you (and not the media, or the internet, or friends). You are the best teacher...don't shy away from that role, else those other sources of (usually bad) information will be your child's sex education, and how dangerous is that?

- The best place for your child to learn about relationships, love, commitment, and respect is from you. Never forget this.
- Watching television with your children (in this age where even prime-time television programs contain all too many references to sex) is a good time to discuss sexuality issues.
- Common questions a parent should be prepared for include: "how old do girls have to be to have a baby", "why do boys have erections", "what is a period", "how do people have sex", "why do some men/women like other men/women"
- Questions about love, romance, and relationships become more common. Your child may ask about how her parents met and fell in love.
- Questions about puberty become more common, and girls by age 8 to 10 years may begin to worry about the start of their menses. Be prepared to answer questions about puberty, and how the child's body will change.
- Do NOT have a singular, "birds and the bees" talk, which only serves to make everyone (including the child) feel uncomfortable, and to give the impression that the parent is not otherwise approachable about topics relating to sexuality.
- BEFORE your children reach their early teens, girls and boys should know about the correct names and functions of male and female sex organs, puberty and how the body changes, menstruation, sexual intercourse and the risk of getting pregnant and/or getting a sexually transmitted disease (including HIV), and your family values regarding dating, sexual activity, cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs.

The Teen Years

During the teen years, your talks about sex should focus more on the social and emotional aspects of sex, and your values. Be ready to answer questions like:

- When can I start dating?
- When it is okay to kiss a boy or a girl?
- How far is too far?

- How will I know when I'm ready to have sex?
- Won't having sex help me keep my boyfriend (or girlfriend)?
- Do you think I should have sex before marriage?
- Is oral sex really sex?
- How do I say "No"?
- What do I do if someone tries to force me to have sex?

Answer your teen's questions based on your values – even if you think your values are old-fashioned. If you explain the reasons for your beliefs, your teen is more likely to understand and adopt your values.

Other common concerns of teens include:

- Peer pressure
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Prevention of pregnancy
- Contraception
- Date rape
- Sexual orientation
- Masturbation
- Nocturnal Emissions ("Wet Dreams")

Sex is a very personal and private matter. Many parents find it difficult to talk with their children about sex. Teens may be too embarrassed, not trust their parent's advice, or prefer not to talk with their parents about it. But sex is an important topic to talk about. The following tips may help make talking with your teen easier:

- Be prepared. Read about the subject so your own questions are answered before talking with your teen. Practice what you plan to say with your spouse or partner, a friend, or another parent. Speak calmly and clearly with your teen. Don't be silly, or overly serious.
- Be honest. Let your teen know that talking about sex isn't easy for you but that you think it's important that information about sex comes from you. And even though you would prefer that your values be accepted, ultimately decisions about sex are up to your teen. If your teen disagrees with you or gets angry, take heart, you have been heard. These talks will help your teen develop a solid value system, even if it's different than your own.
- Listen. Give your teen a chance to talk and ask questions. It's important that you give your full attention.
- Try to strike a balance. While teens need privacy, they also need information and guidance from parents. If your teen doesn't want to talk with you about sex and tells you it's none of your business, be firm and say that it is your business. Your teen should know that you're

asking out of love and concern, especially because there are potentially harmful situations. If your teen is quiet when you try to talk about sex, say what you have to say. Your message may get through.