

Talking With Your Young Child About Sex



As a parent, you know it's coming—that dreaded moment when your adorable, innocent little boy or girl suddenly glances up and asks, “Where do babies come from?”

Learning about sex begins as soon as your child is able to view, listen, and sense the world around her. Sexuality is part of every person's life, no matter what the age. As your child grows and develops, she may giggle with friends about “private parts,” share “dirty” jokes, and scan through dictionaries looking up taboo words. Her curiosity is natural, and children of all ages have questions. When she is ready to ask you, as a parent you should be ready to answer.

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 she can turn to for answers—you.

The best teacher

Your child will learn many things about the world from friends, movies, television, music, the Internet, and even advertisements. When it comes to something as important as sexuality, nothing can replace the influence of a parent. The best place for your child to learn about relationships, love, commitment, and respect is from you. When your child feels loved and respected by you, he is more likely to turn to you for answers and advice. Giving advice and teaching your child to make wise choices is one of your most important jobs as a parent.

Where to begin

Everyday events will give you plenty of chances to teach your child about topics related to sex. These are called *teachable moments*. For example, talking about body parts during bath time will be much more effective than talking about body parts during dinner. A pregnancy or birth in the family is a good time to discuss how babies are conceived and born. Watching television with your child may also be a good time to discuss sexuality issues.

Teachable moments can happen anywhere—while shopping, at the movies, or even at the park. Use them when they happen. You won't need to make a speech. First, find out what your child already knows. Let your child guide the talk with her questions. Some children may not ask for information if they think you might be uneasy with it. Others might test you by asking embarrassing questions. Talk openly, and let your child know she can ask you about anything.

When your child begins to ask questions, the following might make it easier for both of you:

- **Don't laugh or giggle**, even if the question is cute. Your child shouldn't be made to feel ashamed for her curiosity.
- **Try not to appear overly embarrassed or serious** about the matter.
- **Be brief**. Don't go into a long explanation. Answer in simple terms. Your 4-year old doesn't need to know the details of intercourse.

- **Be honest**. Use proper names for all body parts.
- **See if your child wants or needs to know more**. Follow up your answers with, “Does that answer your question?”
- **Listen** to your child's responses and reactions.
- **Be prepared to repeat yourself**.

If you are uneasy talking about sex or answering certain questions, be honest about that too. Consider asking a relative, close family friend, or your pediatrician to help talk to your child.

Questions, questions, questions

The questions your child asks and the answers that are appropriate to give will depend on your child's age and ability to understand. Following are some of the issues your child may ask about and what he should know at each stage:

Preschool children

“How did I get in your tummy?”

“Where was I before I got in your tummy?”

“How did I get out?”

“Where do babies come from?”

“How come girls don't have a penis?”

18 months to 3 years of age—Your child will begin to learn about his own body. It is important to teach your child the proper names for body parts. Making up 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 covered by a bathing suit).

4 to 5 years of age—Your child may begin to show an interest in basic sexuality, both her own and that of the opposite sex. She may ask where babies come from. She may want to know why boys' and girls' bodies are different. She may also touch her own genitals and may even show an interest in the genitals of other children. These are not adult sexual activities, but signs of normal interest. However, your child needs to learn what is all right to do and what is not. Setting limits to exploration is really a family matter. You may decide to teach your child the following:

- Interest in genital organs is healthy and natural.
- Nudity and sexual play in public are not all right.
- No other person, including even close friends and relatives, may touch her “private parts.” The exceptions are doctors and nurses during physical exams and her own parents when they are trying to find the cause of any pain in the genital area.

As your child approaches school-age, she should know the following:

- Proper names of body parts
- Functions of each
- Physical differences between boys and girls

School-age children

“How old do girls have to be before they can have a baby?”

“Why do boys get erections?”

“What is a period?”

“How do people have sexual intercourse?”

“Why do some men like other men?”

5 to 7 years of age—Your child is learning much more about how people get along with each other. He may become interested in what takes place sexually between adults. His questions will become more complex as he tries to understand the connection between sexuality and making babies. He may come up with his own explanations about how the body works or where babies come from. He may also turn to his friends for answers.

It is important to help your child understand sexuality in a healthy way. Lessons and values he learns at this age will stay with him as an adult. It will encourage meaningful adult relationships later.

8 to 9 years of age—Your child probably already has developed a sense of right and wrong. She is able to understand that sex is something that happens between two people who love each other. She may begin to become interested in how mom and dad met and fell in love. As questions about romance, love, and marriage arise, she may also ask about homosexual relationships. Use this time to discuss your family's thoughts about homosexuality. Explain that liking or loving someone does not depend on the person's gender and is different from liking someone sexually.

Media Matters

Most children can mimic a movie or TV character, sing an advertising jingle, or give other examples of what they have learned from media. Sadly, these examples may include naming a popular brand of beer, striking a “sexy” pose, or play fighting. Media offer entertainment, culture, news, sports, and education and are an important part of our lives. But some of what they teach may not be what we want children to learn.

American media today (TV, movies, videos, ads, computer games, as well as music lyrics and music videos), often contain sexual images and suggestive content. In fact, the average young viewer is exposed to over 14,000 sexual references each year. Only a small amount of what is seen in the media shows responsible sexual behavior or gives accurate information about birth control, abstinence, or the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease.

Whatever the form of media, messages can have a positive or negative effect on your child. Just as you would limit certain foods in your child's diet that may be unhealthy, you also should limit your child's media diet of messages.

At this age, your child will be going through many changes that will prepare her for puberty. As she becomes more and more aware of her sexuality, it is important that you talk to her about delaying sexual intercourse until she is older. You should also talk about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), especially AIDS. Be sure she

understands how these diseases can spread and how she can protect herself from them and from pregnancy. Teaching your child to be sexually responsible is one of the most important lessons in her life.

A word about...masturbation

Masturbation is a part of childhood sexuality that many parents find difficult to discuss. Up to the age of 5 or 6, it is quite common. Around age 6, children become more socially aware and may feel embarrassed about touching themselves in public. Make sure your child understands that masturbation is a private activity, not a public one. Masturbation in private may continue and is normal.

There are times when frequent masturbation can point to a problem. It could be a sign that the child is under a lot of stress or not receiving enough attention at home. In rare cases, it could even be a tip-off to sexual abuse. Some sexually abused children become overly interested in their sexuality. If masturbation becomes a problem, talk to your pediatrician. For most children, masturbation is nothing to worry about. It is normal.

As your child approaches puberty, she should know about the following:

- The body parts related to sex and their functions
- How babies are conceived and born
- Puberty and how the body will change
- Menstruation (Both boys and girls can benefit from this information.)
- Sexual intercourse
- Birth control
- Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and how they are spread, including HIV and AIDS
- Masturbation
- Homosexuality
- Family and personal guidelines

For more information, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) on the Web at www.aap.org or ask your pediatrician about other AAP brochures on sexuality. You also may want to look for books on talking to your child about sexuality from your local library or bookstore.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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