



How To Talk With Your Child About Sexuality

A Parent's Guide

We live in a very sexual world. There are messages about sex all around us — on the radio and TV, in movies, magazines, and music. Sex is used to sell everything from soap to sports cars. Political and religious leaders have a lot to say about sex, too. So do people in locker rooms, at the mall, and in our own homes. And our kids hear it all.

But despite all the talk, our kids don't get much useful information.

Many kids become confused and may be pressured into sexual intercourse before they are ready. Too often their lives are shaped by sexual abuse, sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancy.

We want our children to have healthy and rewarding lives. And we all know that teaching them about sex is very important. But for many of us it's hard to talk about sex — especially with our own children.

What Is Sexuality?

We are all sexual. Our sexuality includes:

- our bodies and how our bodies work
- our genders — male or female
- our sexual orientations — straight, gay, or bisexual
- our values about life, love, and the people our lives touch

And sexuality influences how we feel about all of those things and how we experience love, compassion, joy, and sorrow.

Why Do Children Need To Know About Sexuality?

Kids who understand their sexuality are better able to take charge of their lives and have loving relationships. Understanding sexuality helps kids cope with their feelings and with peer pressure. It also helps protect them from sexual abuse — and from becoming sexual abusers.

Kids learn about their sexuality from the day they are born. Home is the most meaningful

place in which they learn about it. It is important to let kids feel good about their sexuality from the very beginning. This will make it easier for them to ask questions about sex later on in life. As they grow, we can give them useful information to help them make good decisions about their sexuality.

But we've got a real challenge on our hands. Our kids watch about 24 hours of television a week. They spend more time watching TV than they do in the classroom. They watch thousands of sexual messages on TV every year. And our kids listen to the radio about 21 hours a week. Half the rock lyrics they listen to are about sex or love. But almost none of the information they get from music and TV is useful.

It's up to us to help our children grow up to have healthy and happy sex lives. We can do this by giving them useful information. We can set good examples for them by having respectful attitudes about sex. We can help them understand why it's important to avoid sexually transmitted infections and teen pregnancy. We can teach them how to say "No!" and how to take "No!" seriously. And we can be sure to let them know how to get birth control and protect themselves from infections **before** they start having sex.

Is There Such a Thing As Too Much Information?

No. Information does not encourage kids to be sexually active. Kids make better decisions about sex when they have all the information they need and when there are no taboos on what to talk about at home. And knowledge helps them protect themselves against pregnancy and disease when they do decide to have sex.

What If I'm Uncomfortable Talking About Sex?

Join the club. Most of us feel that way, and it's not surprising:

- Many of us were taught that sex is too "dirty" for words.
- Many of us are afraid that we don't have all the answers.
- It's hard for some of us to admit our children are sexual.
- It's even hard for some of us to admit that we are sexual.
- And many of us fear the normal sexual feelings between our children and us.

But we can still help our kids become comfortable with their sexuality. The best way to handle it is to be open with them about our feelings. Being "real" with them allows them to be "real" with us. You can start by saying something like, "This is hard for me to talk about. My parents and I never discussed these things. But I want you to have someone to talk with."

Whatever you do, don't cover up your feelings or avoid the issue. That will make matters worse. Just remember, giving children helpful information about sexuality is as important as giving them food, shelter, and loving care.

When's the Best Time To Start?

It's best to start as soon as children begin getting sexual messages. And they start getting them as soon as they're born. But don't worry if you haven't started yet. It's never too late. Just don't try to "catch up" all at once. The most important thing is to be open and available whenever a child wants to talk. The rest will take care of itself.

What Do Kids Want To Know? What Do They Need To Know? When Do They Need To Know It?

What kids want most is to know that they're "normal." We can help them understand that it is "normal" for everyone to be different. In fact, the most important lesson we can share with our kids is just that: **Being different is normal.**

Here's how to help children at different stages of their lives:

Birth to Two:

We give babies a sense of themselves from birth. We make them feel secure or insecure by:

- the way we hold and touch them
- the way we feed, wash, and diaper them
- the tone of our voices
- letting them feel comfortable with their bodies and emotions

They can develop healthier feelings about their sexuality if we do all these things in a pleasant, loving, and caring way.

It is normal for babies to explore their bodies. They are quick to learn that touching their sex organs feels good. They should be allowed to enjoy this. If we yell at them or slap their hands, they'll do it anyway — but they'll feel guilty about it. And they won't trust us later in life when they're looking for guidance about sex. It's also important to let kids know that bowel movements and urinating are normal and healthy functions.

Three to Five:

By the time they are three, kids are ready to know that women and men have different sex organs. They may have already wondered about it for a while. Talk about it the same way you talk about elbows and noses, fingers and toes. Always use the right names for sex organs. Say "vulva," "penis," and "breasts," instead of family or street words. Otherwise, kids may get the idea that something is "wrong" with these parts of the body.

Toddlers are curious about the bodies of their parents and other children. They may play "doctor" to look at each other's sex organs. This is a normal way for kids to find out differences and learn about their sexuality. You can choose to allow it or not. But it won't help to punish children for being normal.

Most kids touch their sex organs for pleasure. Masturbation is very common during this time. We must reassure kids that it is normal to masturbate — but only in private.

Three-year-olds also start wanting to know, "Where do babies come from?" You don't have to describe sexual intercourse at this point. Answers should be simple for now. You might say something like, "Babies grow in a special place inside the mother." As the years pass, you can slowly add other details as the child becomes able to understand them.

It is normal for four-year-olds to become very attached to a parent — even an absent parent. Kids may even be jealous of the other parent or partner. They can become attached to parents or caregivers of both genders. None of these attachments means a child is gay or straight. We should let our kids be comfortable with whatever attachments they form. We should not tease them about having "girlfriends" or "boyfriends."

Four-year-olds may want to snuggle in bed with parents or caregivers. They may also want to see them without clothes on. We should set limits that make our families comfortable. But children should not be punished for such desires.

Five to Seven:

It is common for kids to become less attached to parents and caregivers at this time. They are beginning to realize their own femininity or masculinity. And they can get very clubby about it. That's why it is very common for them to say they hate children of the opposite gender. Again, it's better not to tease them about it.

Kids in primary school may be shy about asking questions. But that doesn't mean they don't have questions. Most of them have heard about such things as AIDS, rape, and child abuse. And they wonder about these things even if they don't say anything. So we need to keep talking with them. TV or pictures and headlines in newspapers and magazines can also help us start a conversation.

Sexual fantasies about family members of both genders are common, too. Kids may find these thoughts upsetting. We must reassure them that just dreaming or thinking about things doesn't make them happen.

Pre-teens (eight to 12) need all the facts about menstruation, wet dreams, and other signs of maturing.

Pre-teens worry a lot about whether they are "normal." Boys worry about their penis size. Girls worry about their breast size. We must reassure our children that no two people are the same and that it is normal to be different.

We need to let pre-teens "fit in" with their peers. But we must encourage them to think for themselves and not get carried away by the crowd.

Kids are fascinated with the way their bodies change. It's common for them to look at and touch each other's sex organs. This is one of the ways they learn that they are normal. They do this with friends of both genders. This kind of sex play does not make a child gay or straight.

Most 12-year-olds are ready to know about sex and reproduction. They want to know about sexual and social relationships. They need to know about sexually transmitted infections, birth control, and the consequences of teen pregnancy. And they need to know how all of this can affect their lives.

Teens must learn how to say "no" and understand what "safer sex" is — "safer sex" activities lower the risk of spreading sexually transmitted infections. They must know how to have relationships without getting hurt and without hurting other people. And they must know they are responsible for their choices.

Teens often have profound fears about being "different." They are easy targets for peer pressure and bad advice. We must reassure them that their sexuality and feelings are normal. Gay teens may need even more reassurance.

All teens have to make sexual decisions. Our daughters and sons should consider the following list of questions if they are thinking about "having sex", especially vaginal intercourse:

- Are you embarrassed about being a virgin?
- Do you know how to protect yourself against pregnancy and infection?
- Are you being pressured into having sex?
- Will having sex make you feel differently about yourself?
- Is trying to be more popular a good reason for having sex?
- Should you *have* to "have sex" with a girlfriend or boyfriend?
- Are you considering having sex to get back at your parents?
- Do you know what your limits are?
- Will you be able to let sex partners know your limits?
- Are you emotionally and financially ready to accept the consequences of pregnancy or disease?
- Will you be taken advantage of, or take advantage of someone else?

Helpful Hints For Parents

- Set good examples that show kids how our lives are enriched by our values.
- Reassure them that they're normal.
- Build their self-esteem — credit them for their talents, personalities, and accomplishments.
- Respect our teenagers' privacy as much as we value our own. Do not pry.
- Use correct names for sex organs and sexual behaviors. We can practice saying them out loud or in front of a mirror if we are embarrassed.

- Take advantage of "teachable moments." A friend's pregnancy, neighborhood gossip, and TV shows can help start a conversation.
- Give accurate, honest, short, and simple answers.
- Admit when we don't know an answer. We can help our kids find the answer in a book or other resource.
- Accept questions at face value. For example, "How old do you have to be to 'have sex?'" doesn't necessarily mean, "I'm thinking about having sex. What should I do?" Questions about sex are often attempts to understand a family's values.
- Let our kids know that we're available, and make it a habit to share what we think and feel.
- Ask questions even if *they* don't — questions about what they think and what they know.
- Be clear about our own feelings and values and figure out what we want to say about them before we speak. Talking with a spouse, friend, or someone else we trust can help us clarify our message. It can also give us the confidence we need to talk with our own children.
- Use our teens' mistakes as positive opportunities for learning — criticizing, nagging, lecturing, or shouting won't help them learn.
- Let our body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice support what we say with words.
- Get to know the world our kids live in. What pressures are they feeling? What do they consider normal? If we show interest in their activities and friends, they'll know we care and want to be a part of their lives.

Text adapted from PPFA's *How to Talk with Your Child about Sexuality*.

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