

From AAP and Nemours Foundation

Talking to Your Kids About Sex

Many parents wonder about when and how to discuss sex with their kids.

Pam Bushnell, a clinical social worker at a children's hospital in Delaware, says that it's important for parents to start talking to kids about sex when they're young, instead of waiting to have one big conversation about sex when kids hit puberty.

Kids are likely to have questions over time about the physical changes they may be experiencing and sexual behavior. It's important for parents to answer those questions in a way that is appropriate to the child's age and maturity level. From the time that kids are very young, it's a good idea to look for "teachable moments" - times like toilet teaching or bath time, or the birth of a sibling, when a discussion about sexuality might occur naturally and in context.

If your child doesn't ask questions about sex, don't ignore the subject. If you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about talking about sex with your child - and many parents do - you may want to try reading your child age-appropriate books relating to sexuality. At about age 5, you can begin to introduce such books. That way you can approach the topic in a setting that feels comfortable and familiar to you and your child - reading a book - and it also allows you to have the conversation without having to talk face-to-face, which, for many people, adds to the discomfort.

Many schools start sex education in the classroom in the fifth or sixth grade. Some of the topics addressed in a sex education class may include anatomy, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy. It's important to be open to continuing the dialogue and answering questions at home.

Keep in mind that your child or teen may not feel comfortable approaching you with his or her questions about sexuality. That's okay. But it's important to make sure that your child has an adult that he or she trusts - like a teacher, a school counselor, a school nurse or a doctor - that they can approach with those questions.

Encouraging Your Child's Healthy Sexual Development

Regardless of how and when you decide to discuss sex with your child, these guidelines may help:

- Be your child's best resource. It's important, from a young age, for your child to feel that that he or she can always come to you with a question about sexuality, no matter what it is. It helps if you treat sexuality as a normal part of being human, not something "dirty" or embarrassing.
- Foster your child's self-esteem and teach your child to be comfortable with who he or she is. A child who feels good about himself or herself is less likely to give in to peer pressure and will be better able to handle relationships.
- Always be honest. You can always start with less detail and add more as your child becomes more curious - but lying or avoiding the tough questions can easily backfire. And remember, it's OK to say, "I don't know" and get back to your child later, or to look up the answer together.
- Give the facts to your child, but also give your child a sense of where you stand. Teens, especially, may seem uninterested in your values - but they are taking in more than you think they are.

- Don't think that only moms should talk to girls and dads should talk to boys. Everyone has a role to play in supporting a child's healthy sexual development.
- Discuss with your partner the messages about sexuality that you want to convey to your child. Know what your child/teen is learning about sexuality in health class at school and discuss it together.

If you have questions about how to talk with your child about sex it's a good idea to talk with your child's doctor. Lots of parents find that this is a tough issue to tackle. And your child's doctor may be able to offer some helpful perspective.

Reviewed by: Steven Dowshen, MD

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How to Talk with Your Child About Sex

It's best to start talking with children about sexuality in early childhood.

- But it's never too late.

- Always be open and available when a child wants to talk.
- The most important lesson we can share with our kids is, "Being different is normal."

We live in a very sexual world. There are messages about sex all around us — on the Internet, radio, and TV, and 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. 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 young people become confused and may be pressured into sexual intercourse before they are ready. Too often sexual abuse, sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancy shape their lives.

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?

All of us are sexual. Our sexuality includes

- our bodies and how our bodies work
- our biological sex
- our gender *identity* — our feelings about being male or female
- our sexual orientations — straight, gay, or bisexual
- our values about life, love, and the people in our lives

And sexuality influences how we *feel* about all of these things and how we experience the world.

Why Do Children Need to Know About Sexuality?

Understanding sexuality helps kids cope with their feelings and with peer pressure. They can take charge of their lives and have loving relationships. It also helps protect them from sexual abuse — and from becoming sexual abusers.

Kids learn about sexuality from the day they are born. Home can be the most meaningful place to learn about it. We can help our kids feel good about their sexuality from the very beginning. Then they will be more likely to trust us enough to ask questions about sex later on in life.

Is There Such a Thing as Too Much Information?

No. Information does not encourage kids to be sexually active. Young people 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.

(see below for what kids want to know, what they need to know and when they need to know it; typical questions relative to age)

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" to talk about.
- 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 be open with them about being uncomfortable about talking about sex. We 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."

Don't cover up your feelings or avoid the issue. That will make matters worse. Start a conversation, keep it going, and be open from the beginning. Just remember — information about sexuality is as important as 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.

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.

All babies explore their bodies. They learn quickly that touching their sex organs feels good. This is a natural and normal part of their development. 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 that 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. Talk about it the same way we 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 often 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. We 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 develop a curiosity about "Where do babies come from?" We don't have to describe sexual intercourse at this point. Answers can be simple for now. We might say something like, "Babies grow in a special place inside the mother." As the years pass, we can add other details as the child becomes able to understand them.

Four-year-olds may 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

Kids usually become less attached to parents and caregivers at this time. They are beginning to realize their own femininity or masculinity. It is very common for them to say they hate children of the opposite gender. We can encourage them to develop their own sense of self of being an individual and we can teach them to be respectful of others. Again, it's better not to tease them about their feelings.

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. So keep talking with them.

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.

Eight to 12

Preteens need all the facts about menstruation, wet dreams, and other signs of puberty and growing up. They need to know that everyone develops at different times.

We need to let pre-teens "fit in" with their peers. But we must also encourage them to think for themselves.

Preteens worry a lot about whether they are "normal." Boys worry about their penis size. Girls worry about their breast size. Reassure them that no two people are the same — that being different is normal.

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

Most preteens 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.

13 to 18

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 should also know about birth control methods. It's important to talk with them about how to have relationships without getting hurt and without hurting other people. And they must know they are responsible for their choices.

Reassure them that their sexuality and feelings are normal. Gay, bisexual, and questioning teens may need even more reassurance.

All teens have to make sexual decisions. Parents and their kids can consider the following list of questions. Parents may want to think about how they would have answered these questions when they were kids.

- Are you embarrassed about being or not being a "virgin"?
- Do you know how to protect yourself against pregnancy and infection?
- Are you being pressured to have sex?
- Will having sex make you feel differently about yourself?
- Is trying to be more popular a good reason for having sex?
- Are you considering having sex to get back at your parents or anyone else?
- Do you know what your sexual 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 infection?

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 — give credit for talents and accomplishments, offer constructive advice, and avoid criticism and punishment.
- Respect our kids' privacy as much as we value our own. Do not pry.
- Use correct names for sex organs and sexual behaviors.
- Take advantage of "teachable moments." A friend's pregnancy, neighborhood gossip, and TV shows can help start a conversation.
- Include topics such as sexual orientation, sexual abuse, and prostitution.
- Be clear about our values and let kids know that others may have different values about sexuality. Teach them that respect for differences is important.
- Don't use scare tactics as a way to stop young people from having sex — it doesn't work.
- 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."
- 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.
- Figure out what we want to say about our own feelings and values before we speak.
- Let our body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice support what we say with words.
- Get to know the world in which our kids live. What pressures are they feeling? What do they consider normal?

Update — Chelsea Nelson, July 2006

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