

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.

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.

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 also may 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

Start at the Very Beginning

As parents, we can be an honest source of information on a topic often whispered about on the playground. Start sex education early, as your child has questions. If kids are asking, they are getting answers. Isn't it much better for these answers to be accurate and from you?

Curiosity is natural. Susie is going to want to know why Jack's body is different than hers. A child may want to touch his or her genitals. This is all part of growing up. Rather than scolding, teach children what behaviors are private. If we act embarrassed or are unwilling to talk about such topics, children may believe that their bodies and their sexuality are things to be ashamed of.

Since every child is different there really is not a single approach to the subject. However, those of us who have lived through the experience can offer some guidelines. As always, your child's doctor may have some suggestions and/or some helpful materials. Don't hesitate to ask.

- Have a two-way conversation, rather than a one-way lecture. You want to give your child the information he or she needs and create an opportunity for open discussion. Ask your child what he or she thinks the answer is before answering. This is a good method to gauge where your child is with the subject and if he or she has been given any misinformation.
- Use age-appropriate language. When your child asks a question, try to answer it using terms he or she understands. If you introduce a new term, give a clear definition, but don't give too many details. An overload of information can be confusing.
- Avoid the stork. If your child is asking a question, it is because he or she has been exposed to a subject and may be confused on the answer. Making up cute stories can lead to future confusion ... and mistrust. Giving honest answers establishes you as a safe place to go with questions.
- Tell it like it is. Use a matter-of-fact tone, indicating there is nothing to be embarrassed about. Children should know what a penis and a vagina are, just as they would learn about toes and fingers.

- Take the lead. If your child hasn't asked any questions or expressed curiosity by age 5 or 6, introduce the topic. Your child may be afraid to ask.
- Turn to books. Books allow your child a resource that can be taken to a private spot, like his or her room. They also include illustrations, which visually depict information that may be hard for your child to conceptualize.

On the Playground

While in elementary school, children are going to hear and probably repeat language they have heard from other kids. If your child comes home and starts talking about sex in a manner that sounds suspiciously like an R-rated movie, simply explain what the words really mean, why they shouldn't be used, and then provide more appropriate language.

You may need recess with your friends as well. Talk to other parents whose children are at this same stage. Swapping stories can provide comic relief and a chance to talk strategy on what has helped or perhaps not helped other households.

The Chalkboard

As their bodies begin to mature, children need to know what to expect and what will be changing. Do check to see what kind of education is being offered at school, but don't leave all of the discussion in the classroom.

Sex ed usually covers the basics, but there is always the chance of misinterpretation. While the chalkboard may be a good place to obtain a definition of the term "wet dream" and a diagram highlighting where the fallopian tubes are, in a room full of teenagers with raging hormones the real question on many of their minds is, "do I do it, or do I wait?"

Answering Your Child's Questions About Sex — The Preschool Years

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

- "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 also may 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

As your child's sexual awareness continues to develop, your child may begin experimenting with 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.

Answering Your Child's Questions about Sex — The School-Age Years

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

"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 also may 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 also may 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.

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.

As your child approaches puberty, he 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)
- Sexual intercourse
- Birth control
- Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and how they spread, including HIV
- Masturbation
- Homosexuality
- Family and personal guidelines

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Talking to your Preschool and School Aged Child about Sex/Sexuality AAP Guide

