



The Big Talk: Sexual Issues and Your Child

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Although times have changed and we think children are becoming sexually aware at earlier ages, the stages of children's development and awareness have not changed. Even in 1947, before television became the major influence it is today, researchers [Ramsey, Conn and Kanner] found that while most children under the age of 12 had only asked their parents two questions about sex by the age of 12, over half knew the explicit details of intercourse, babies, masturbation, contraception and prostitution. Hopefully, what has changed is how openly parents and children share information and experiences.

The Basics

Parents are eager to share suggestions to shape their children's behavior about bodily functions and self-care, like toilet training and tooth brushing. Gradually, responsibilities for good hygiene and good judgment are transferred as children learn to be independent. The same principles apply to teaching children to respect the human body, to tolerate other people's choices while maintaining their own beliefs and to keep themselves safe.

Build strong lines of communication early and establish an ongoing dialogue based on your child's developmental stage, emotional readiness, and situations that arise and require explanation. If unsure how much your child wants to know, ask him/her what he/she thinks is going on and correct any misinformation prior to assessing readiness to learn more. If you continue to remind him/her to be careful and be prepared, to question relationships and activities, and to trust his/her instincts and family values, the child will be more willing to approach you about confusing or uncomfortable topics.



Your pediatrician will review certain aspects of sexuality with your family at your yearly well child examination. As you prepare for your child's exam, ask if he/she has any questions about how his/her body is growing or about the human body. Be aware of what information has been provided within the schools and what details peers are providing.

Discuss the changes in their bodies as they grow and the changes in the way they relate to others. Reinforce family beliefs about nudity, sexuality and safety. Prior to your child's appointment, alert your pediatrician to any specific concerns or family beliefs you want reinforced. Ask your pediatrician for the American Academy of Pediatrics bibliography of books on sexuality for parents and pamphlets on related topics.

Age-by-Age Guidelines

The very young child, under three years old, is developing a sense of self, but cannot be responsible for personal safety due to a lack of judgment and experience. Gender identification is established and most children become aware of private parts and the physical differences between girls and boys through toilet training, exposure to infants and peer play. Masturbation behaviors appear in most girls and boys by around age two. Toilet training is an ideal time to teach correct anatomical names for body parts and to introduce the idea of touching your own private parts in private places and not allowing others to touch unless parents say it is okay. Be very aware of your child's temperament and how he/she relates to those you entrust with his/her care.

By five or six years old, children are trying to develop a sense of control over their surroundings without losing the security most caregivers provided during infancy. They imitate adult behavior in their quest for independence. Try to avoid exposure to sexually ex-

PLICIT images as your child becomes a preschooler, imitating courtship behaviors, playing house and perhaps playing doctor. Parents need to start respecting their child's right to privacy and encouraging their child to develop a sense of personal boundaries. Some experts believe that seeing a naked adult can be confusing and overstimulating to a child. If your child seems overly interested or embarrassed by nudity, respect his/her comfort level.

Make sure your child knows not to go anywhere out of your house or in public out of your sight without telling you or the grown up in charge first. Teach him that talking to strange adults is okay when accompanied by a safe adult, but if a strange adult asks the child for help, he/she needs to run to a safe adult. If you get separated from your child in a public place, teach the child to ask a grown up with children for help, but never to get into a strange car.

Children should be allowed to politely refuse to kiss or cuddle an adult if they feel uncomfortable. Since 8 out of 10 perpetrators of sexual abuse are known to the victim, teach children that even if an adult tricks them into a game they do not like, they always have the right to say no and leave. Perceived consequences of telling may prevent them from revealing abuse from a trusted adult or older child. They may be afraid of being blamed or have ambivalent feelings about an abuser who makes them feel grown up or gives them presents. Make sure to listen to your child. Remain calm as he/she talks. Promise you will not leave him/her alone with an adult with whom they are uncomfortable.

As friends and family have babies, questions arise. Give accurate information, but only answer the questions that are asked. Keep it simple. Tell your child that babies grow in a special place near the mother's stomach called the uterus, not in the mother's stom-



ach. Explain that the father provides the seed, which connects with the mother's egg to start a baby, and that is why babies are mixtures of their mother and father. If they ask how the sperm gets into the mother, explain intercourse in very matter of fact terms, but make sure to mention that this is something that grown ups do when they are in love and sure they want a baby. If questions persist, ask your librarian for some picture books written at your child's level.

Talking To An Older Child

As your child grows, they become more sexually socialized. By the age of 10, most children have experienced some type of crush. Encourage your child to be open about what a crush means. What do they think it means to be sexy? If they come home saying a classmate is gay, discuss the meaning of this term and use it as a stepping stone to discuss tolerance of alternative lifestyles. If they come home talking about peers going out, use it as a stepping stone to discuss the differences between friendship and romance.

Parents should present a set of family guidelines about physical attraction and action. Around fourth or fifth grade, schools provide biological information about puberty. Be familiar with the curriculum in your school and ask your child's opinion of how it is presented. Modesty and curiosity coexist. Respect your child's modesty and need for privacy. Reinforce your child's normalcy, wherever he/she falls in the puberty curve. Explore your child's knowledge about the changes going on in the opposite sex and correct when needed.

Although most teens think they understand sex and intercourse, others have only a vague notion since they have not really connected the lessons of health class and messages from media representations with the real life possibilities of pregnancy and disease from sexual experimentation. Define terms such as

oral sex, AIDS, rape, contraception and abstinence. Discuss and define the parameters of appropriate sexual behaviors, including showing respect for their own body and others. Discuss risk behaviors like skipping school, smoking, alcohol and drug use, provocative dressing and piercings and multiple sex partners. Emphasize a sense of trust in their knowledge of your family's beliefs and a sense of personal responsibility, yet do not give them too much freedom. Know where they are and who they are with and check on them.

If your child becomes less willing to participate in these conversations, approach him or her in terms of news items or your own experiences. Talk about your first date or the first time someone tried to get you to smoke. Use a news headline on an adult who was mugged as an example of the folly of separating from a group. Instill a sense of caution especially when dealing with strangers. If your teen violates your trust, act swiftly with removal of freedoms until he/she regains your trust.

There is no evidence that discussing sex encourages sexual behavior. When speaking to older teens, you should reiterate the family's values while also saying that you respect their right as young adults to make their own choices. Reassure them that while you may not always approve of their actions, you will always accept them and assist them with coping with the consequences of their actions. Recognize that very few find the perfect romantic/ sexual relationship without a few mistakes and learning experiences along the way. As a parent, hope your children feel comfortable enough to seek your opinions and support when they make these mistakes. Hopefully, there will not be just one or two big talks. Instead, there should be a continuing conversation.