



Talking with Your Children About Sexuality

Young children want to know about their world. They ask lots of questions. Most children will ask questions about sex and sexuality. Children ask these questions because they want to figure things out. Most parents are pretty good at answering questions. Sometimes it is different when the questions are about sex. Maybe your daughter will point to a friend's penis and ask, "What's that?" Many parents are not ready when that happens. But you can get ready ahead of time. You can think about how to answer children's questions about sexuality before they come up. Here are some ideas that have helped other parents.

1. Use everyday chances to talk. Maybe you have a friend who is pregnant. That gives you a chance to talk about where babies come from. Maybe you are teaching your son to use the toilet. This is a good time to teach him the right word for his penis. You might be changing your little girl's diaper while your son watches. Your son might ask where your girl's penis is. Then you can explain that she doesn't have one because she is a girl.

2. Use simple words. When children ask questions, answer with short, simple sentences. Think about the child's age. Use words the child can understand. Children ask questions because they want to know answers. You do not need to tell them more than they ask. When they want to know more, they will ask more. Always try to answer questions simply and honestly. This tells children that it is OK to ask questions.

3. Use the right words. It helps to use the real words for body parts with your child. Try to avoid silly or cute words. Children who use silly words can confuse other people. Children also can be embarrassed if people laugh or don't understand. You might think that children don't need to talk about things like this outside the family. But children need to use the right words with their doctors. They also might need to know them in childcare and at school.

4. Don't make a big deal of their questions. Try not to act surprised or shocked. That could make children think that there is something wrong with talking about sex. Talk with them about sex when they are young. Then they might talk with you about sex and their feelings when they are teens.

5. Talk about bodies, but also talk about feelings. Your child might ask where babies come from. You can talk about where babies grow. Talk about how love grows between the man and woman. Talk about loving and caring for each other. Children need to hear that sex is not just about bodies.

6. Help children feel good about their bodies. There are not "good" body parts and "bad" body parts. Do not call some body parts dirty or nasty. Help children learn to take care of their bodies.

7. Talk about being private. Children need to learn limits. They need to understand when they can be naked and when they need to wear clothes. They will learn that they need to be naked in the bathtub. They will learn that they should be dressed in school or in a store. Children sometimes touch themselves to feel good. They need to learn that they should do that only in private. Look for natural times to talk about these rules.

human development

8. Talk about different kinds of touching. Children should learn that it is good to give hugs and get hugs from people they like. It is good for mothers, fathers, and doctors to touch children to take care of them. It is not good if someone touches a child and makes her uncomfortable. Children should learn that they can tell someone to stop if touching feels wrong. They should tell another adult if that happens.

9. Teach children what you believe and what you think is important. Children learn values from a very early age. Talk about how men and women should treat each other. Share your ideas with your children, but let them have their own ideas. Know how you feel about same-sex relationships. Share those ideas with your children.

Talking with your provider

At childcare, children might talk about sex. They might ask questions. Tell the provider how you feel about topics related to sex. Ask about the policy and values in the childcare setting. Ask if there is a written policy statement. Talk with your provider about how she or he answers questions. Maybe your providers' values are different from yours. You can explain to your child that people have different ideas about things. Ask your provider to talk about how people have different beliefs. This teaches the children to respect other people's views.

Books to read with your child

Some parents like to use books to talk about sex and sexuality with their children. Using books might make it easier for you to explain things to your child. Here are some books that may help you talk with children in the right way for the child's age. Your library and bookstore will have other books for children about sexuality. Your child still might ask questions after reading a book. Be ready to answer those questions!

Cole, B. (1993). *Mommy laid an egg*. Chronicle Books: San Francisco, CA. (For older preschool, young school age; how babies are made; basic info about sex)

Cole, J. (1993). *How you were born*. Mulberry Books: New York, NY. (For preschoolers; prenatal development and birth)

Cole, J. (2001). *When you were inside Mommy*. Harper Collins, New York, NY. (For preschoolers; prenatal development; great photos of pre-born infants)

Westheimer, R. (2001). *Who am I? Where did I come from?* Golden Books: New York, NY. (Older preschoolers, young school-agers; simple information on sex, pregnancy, prenatal development and birth)

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