

Talking With Your Young Child About Sex



Children begin learning about sex and sexuality as soon as they are able to view, listen, and sense the world around them. As your children grow and develop, they may giggle with friends about “private parts,” share “dirty” jokes, and look up taboo words in the dictionary. Their curiosity is natural, and children of all ages have questions.

As a parent, you may not feel comfortable talking about sex, or you may not know how to respond to questions about sex. This publication was written by the American Academy of Pediatrics to offer you guidance on how to talk with your children about sex.

You are the best teacher

Your children will learn many things about the world from friends, movies, TV, music, books, magazines, and the Internet. However, when it comes to something as important as sex and sexuality, nothing can replace the influence of a parent.

Talking about sex and sexuality gives you a chance to share your values and beliefs with your children. Sometimes the topic or the questions may seem embarrassing, but your children need to know there is always a reliable, honest source they can turn to for answers—you.

You can teach your children about relationships, love, commitment, and respect. When your children feel loved and respected by you, they are more likely to turn to you for answers and advice. Giving advice and teaching your children to make wise choices is one of your most important jobs as a parent.

Teachable moments

You can find *teachable moments* in everyday events to teach your children about topics related to sex. For example, talk about body parts and what’s “private” during bath time. A pregnancy or birth in the family is a good time to discuss how babies are conceived and born. Watching TV with your children may also be a good time to discuss an on-screen relationship.

Teachable moments can happen anywhere and anytime. Use them when they happen. You don’t need to make a speech. First, find out what your children already know. Let your children guide the talk and ask 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.

When your children begin to ask questions, the following might make it easier for both of you:

- Talk openly, and let your children know they can ask you about anything.
- Don’t laugh or giggle, even if the question is cute. Your children might feel ashamed if you laugh.
- Try not to appear overly embarrassed or serious about the matter.
- Be brief. 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 children want or need to know more. Follow up your answers with, “Does that answer your question?”
- Listen to your children’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. You may want to ask a relative, a close family friend, or your children’s doctor to help explain things.

Questions, questions, questions

The questions your children ask and the answers that are appropriate to give will depend on each child’s age and ability to understand. Following are common questions and some of the issues for different age groups.

Preschool children

“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—Children in this age group begin to learn about their own body. It is important to teach your children 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 children which parts are private (parts covered by a bathing suit).

4 to 5 years of age—Children in this age group may begin to show an interest in basic sexuality, both their own and that of the opposite sex. Children may also touch their own genitals and may even show an interest in the genitals of other children. These are signs of normal interest. However, children need 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 children 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 your child’s “private parts.” The exceptions are doctors and nurses during physical exams with the parent’s permission, and parents when they are trying to find the cause of any pain in the genital area.

By the time children are school-aged, they should know the following:

- Proper names of body parts (including the womb or uterus where a baby grows—not mom’s tummy)
- Functions of each
- Physical differences between boys and girls

School-aged children

“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—Children in this age group learn more about how people get along with each other. They may become interested in what takes place sexually between adults. Their questions will become more complex as they try to understand the connection between sexuality and making babies. They may come up with their own explanations about how the body works or where babies come from. They may also turn to their friends for answers.

It is important to help your children understand sexuality in a healthy way. Lessons and values they learn at this age will stay with them as adults. It will encourage meaningful adult relationships later.

8 to 9 years of age—Children in this age group probably already have developed a sense of right and wrong. They are able to understand that sex is something that happens between 2 people who love each other. They may become interested in how mom and dad met and fell in love. As questions about romance, love, and marriage arise, they may also 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, children will be going through many changes that will prepare them for puberty. Teaching your children to be sexually responsible is one of the most important lessons.

As children approach puberty, they should know about

- The body parts related to sex and their functions
- How babies are conceived and born
- Puberty and how the body will change
- Menstruation (Boys and girls can benefit from this information.)
- Sexual intercourse, including information about why people choose to wait to have sex at a later age or until married
- Birth control
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), how they are spread, and how to protect themselves
- Masturbation
- Homosexuality
- Family and personal guidelines

For more information, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics Web site, www.aap.org. You also may find books on talking to your child about sexuality at your local library or bookstore.

About masturbation

Masturbation is a part of childhood sexuality that many parents find difficult to discuss. Up to the age of 5 or 6 years, it is quite common. Around age 6, children become more socially aware and may feel embarrassed about touching themselves in public. Make sure your children understand 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 a child is under a lot of stress or not receiving enough attention at home. In rare cases, it could even be a sign of sexual abuse. Some sexually abused children become overly interested in their sexuality. If masturbation becomes a problem, talk with your child's doctor. For most children, masturbation is nothing to worry about. It is normal.

Sex and the media

Media entertain, educate, and inform. But some messages may not be what we want children to learn.

American media today often portray sexual images and suggestive sexual content. In fact, the average young viewer is exposed to more than 14,000 sexual references each year. Only a small amount of what is seen in the media shows responsible sexual behavior or gives correct information about abstinence (not having sex), birth control, or the risks of pregnancy and STIs.

Media in any format can have a positive or negative effect on your children. This makes it important for you to know what your children are listening to or watching. Many lyrics can be obtained online in case you need help figuring out the exact words. Watch TV or go to the movies with your children—it can be a great starting point for your next talk about sex.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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