

Communicating with Children About Sex: General Tips

Answer questions as they come up and listen carefully to what is being asked.

Don't put your child off, they may not ask again. Reward a question with, "I'm glad you came to me with that question." Say this before you respond to what was asked. It will teach them to come to you when they have other questions.

Anticipate your child's questions, and then practice your responses ahead of time.

Become familiar with typical sexual questions and behaviors that occur at various ages. This will reduce the chance of being caught off guard.

If you're feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable, say so.

Acknowledging your own discomfort allows your children to acknowledge theirs. You can let your children know you are uncomfortable, but you will talk to them anyway because you love them and want to help them. It is also okay for parents to set limits. You do not have to give specific answers to questions about your own sexual behavior.

Use specific and correct terminology.

Of course, parents and children need a common vocabulary. If your child only knows the slang terms, be sure to translate. Then encourage the use of proper terms.

Initiate the conversation.

Use "teachable moments" - everyday, naturally occurring events. Books, news articles, and TV shows can be wonderful discussion starters. We don't wait until our children ask if they should look both ways before crossing a busy street. It is the job of adults--and especially of parents--to teach our children how to get along in the world. Learning about sexuality is the same. You need to decide what is important for children to know, and then tell them so they are prepared for situations as they arise.

Quick Tips

- It's never too early to start talking
- Create an open environment
- Start conversations with your child
- Trust yourself
- Talk about your values
- Be honest
- Be patient
- Listen carefully and watch closely
- Use everyday opportunities to talk
- Talk about it again and again

Resources For Parents

- Talking tips and new research about having difficult conversations
www.talkingwithkids.org
- Parents' Sex Ed Center
www.advocatesforyouth.org
- The source on adolescent sexual health. Spanish language information available as well
www.teenwisemn.org/for-parents/
- Age specific information. Has Spanish and Native American adaptations as well
www.noplacelikehome.org

Be clear about your values.

This doesn't mean "be judgmental." Children want and need to hear the family's values around sexual issues. They also need to know that their opinions and feelings are respected.

Talk about the joys of sexuality.

This might include telling them that sexuality is natural and healthy, that loving relationships are the best part of life and that intimacy is a wonderful part of adult life.

Be concerned about telling "too little, too late" rather than "too much, too soon."

Provided in an open, honest, and loving manner, information need not cause fear, nor does it encourage experimentation. Remember: your children are hearing about sex everywhere else. They deserve to hear it from you.

Establish an environment where children feel free to ask questions.

Let them know that you honor their right to be informed. Be an "askable parent." It is never a good idea to tell your child to wait until they are older before you will answer their questions. When children ask questions, you have a chance to help them learn.

Know what is taught about sexuality in your schools, churches, temples and youth groups.

Urge these groups to include sexuality education in their programs. While young people often joke, tease and talk about sexuality among themselves, it is more helpful when trained adults lead those talks.

Be aware of the "question behind the question."

The unspoken question, "Am I normal?" is often hiding behind many questions about sexual development, sexual thoughts and sexual feelings. Reassure your children as often as possible.

Commonly Asked Questions

- Why are these body parts private?
- Will I have breasts, pubic hair or a penis like yours? When?
- Where did I come from?
- How did I get in there? How did I get out?
- When can I have a baby?
- How does milk get in a woman's breasts?
- Why does my penis get hard?
- What are pads/tampons for?
- Why do girls have periods? Do boys have them?
- Do men ever marry other men?

Answering Tough Questions

- Keep your face and voice calm.
- Affirm the question.
 - "I'm so glad you asked me!"
 - "I wondered about that when I was your age, too."
- Ask the question back to them.
 - "What do *you* think that means?"
 - "Where did you hear about this?"
- Give a simple but accurate answer.
 - "Babies grow in a special place inside the body called the uterus."
- Ask what they think.
 - "How does that make you feel?"
- Tell them how you feel about the subject, without sounding judgmental.
- Check in.
 - "Does that answer your question?"