



Trauma  
Care

# Newsletter

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9<sup>th</sup> May 2015

## Sex Education



Sex is an important part of being human. It involves more than the physical act of intercourse with another person. It affects how we feel about ourselves as males and females, and even impacts some of the choices we make. That is why it is a good idea to talk to your kids about sex. They are going to learn about it somewhere, so it is best that they learn it from their parents. The best time to begin having these discussions is when your children are in the preteen/middle school years.

### Why Should I Talk to my Kids About Sex?

Talking with your child about sex is important to help him or her develop healthy attitudes toward sex and to learn responsible sexual behavior. Openly discussing sex with your child also enables you to provide accurate information. What they learn elsewhere might not be true, and might not reflect the personal and moral values and principles you want your children to follow. In addition, they need to understand the possible consequences of being sexually active -- including pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as being emotionally hurt.

### If I Talk to my Kids About Sex, Won't That Just Make Them Want to Do It?

It is important for children to understand sexual feelings and relationships before they become sexually active. In fact, studies have shown that teens who have discussed sex with their parents are more likely to wait longer to begin having sex and to use contraception.

### What Should I Tell My Kids About Sex?

First of all, focus on the facts about sex. Consider using the following list of topics as an outline:

- Explanation of anatomy and reproduction in males and females
- Sexual intercourse and pregnancy
- Fertility and birth control
- Other forms of sexual behavior, including oral sex, masturbation, and petting
- Sexual orientation, including heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality
- The physical and emotional aspects of sex, including the differences between males and females



- Self-image and peer pressure
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Rape and date rape, including how being intoxicated (drunk or high), or accepting rides/going to private places with strangers or acquaintances puts you at risk
- How choice of clothing and the way you present yourself sends messages to others about your interest in sexual behavior

### How Should I Talk to My Kids About Sex?

Some parents are uncomfortable talking to their kids about sex. It may help to practice what you are going to say before you sit down with your son or daughter. Be sure to pay attention and listen, as well. It may be helpful to have both parents present for support.

Some kids may be embarrassed to talk about sex or to admit they don't know something, and so may not ask direct questions. Look for opportunities to bring up sexuality issues with your children. Opportunities may come from a scene on TV or in a movie, a book or article, or the appearance of visible changes in your son or daughter, such as the growth of breasts or facial hair. Explain the physical maturation process and the sexual arousal process. Remember to respect your child's privacy, and try to show that you trust him or her to make good decisions.

### Timing

The timing is a matter of balance - not telling children too much, too early, before they're interested or ready to understand, but not waiting until they know too much from negative, incomplete, wrong sources.

Many feel that the peak of a child's readiness is at age eight, when he or she is very verbal and conceptual and is flattered by responsibility and by being treated as a "grown up." This age is like a marvelous window. Kids are old enough to understand but not old enough to be cynical. They are old enough to have real interest and fascination but not old enough to be embarrassed or closed off or to have a lot of preconceptions.

Before the big talk, you should hold some preliminary discussions to prepare the way. And after the big talk there are a number of related subjects that need to be discussed in more detail. Then, as your child enters and experiences adolescence, the focus shifts from facts to behavior, from knowing what he should to doing what he should, and to acting with restraint and responsibility.

(If your child is between eight and twelve, the "big talk" suggested here is still workable and appropriate but will have to be modified so it doesn't sound as if you're "talking down" to your child and to allow for a child who knows more and probably has more questions.)

### Phase I Preliminary "As Needed" Talks with Three to Eight Year Olds

#### Answering questions Without Going Beyond Them

A mother told us a funny (but point-making) story. Her five-year-old son came up to her one evening at home and said, "Mom, where did I come from?" She thought of trying to detour or escape the question somehow, but there was no ready excuse. The two of them were alone at home that night, and she figured that if her son was asking, she'd better summon up her courage and tell him.

They sat down in the living room, and the mother launched into it, not too smoothly and feeling a little embarrassed, but giving it her best shot. The little boy's eyes got wider and wider as he listened without a word, just nodding his head slightly whenever his mother said, "Do you understand that?" And shaking his head slowly whenever she said, "Did you know that?" When she was finished, she said, "Does that answer your question?"



The little fellow squirmed around and said, "Well I just meant you know where did we come from? Like before we moved here last year. I forgot the name of our other town."

While usually not as dramatic as in this story, it is easy to tell very young children too much. The best policy, until they are seven or eight, is just to respond to their questions, their real questions, with simple answers, always deferring detail to later and using the interchange as a way to build a positive anticipation for when they turn eight.

So if a five year old says, "Where do babies come from?" say, "Sometimes when a mommy and daddy love each other, it helps make a baby." If he says, "But how?" say, "It's like a miracle, a wonderful, unbelievable magic. When you're eight, we'll tell you about it."

#### Appreciation for Bodies

A healthy attitude about sex starts with how a child feels about his own body. At a very young age children become aware of their bodies and what they can do. We've seen how older preschoolers continued to find awe and wonder in their bodies while observing thousands of kids go through our Joy Schools.

In dealing with young children, every available opportunity should be taken to point out how lucky we are to be able to see the beauties of the season, to hear creative and inspirational music, to taste different and unique combinations of food (a couple of our children would not call this a joy), to touch a baby's cheek or a kitten's soft fur, and especially to feel the love that we have for the others in our family.

The list of things to point out and be grateful for is endless. The more a child can appreciate his own body as a preschooler, the better foundation he will have for feeling positive about the greatest of all physical miracles.

**By the age of four, most children are curious about certain sexual issues. Young children need clear, honest and brief answers to their questions about sex, babies and bodies.**

Ideally, talking to your child about sex is an ongoing process that begins when they are very young. It's best not to think of sex education as a single lecture given when a child reaches puberty. By the age of four, most children are curious about certain sexual issues and they need clear, honest and brief answers to their questions.

Don't think that telling a child about sex makes them sexually precocious. On the contrary, research indicates that children who have a clear understanding of sexual issues are more likely to behave responsibly, for example, waiting until they are older before they start having sex, and choosing to use contraceptives. If you talk to your preschooler about sex, it paves the way for open communication about sexual issues as they get older.

### Normal sexual development of a preschooler

Don't be horrified or alarmed if your preschooler starts taking an interest in sexual issues - this is completely normal. Typical behaviours can include:

- Masturbation
- Interest in the physical characteristics of the opposite sex
- Undressing with another preschooler and 'playing doctor' together
- Wondering where babies come from.



### Preparing yourself

Parents may feel embarrassed, uncomfortable or hesitant when talking to their children about sex. Suggestions include:

- Discuss your child's sex education with your partner, and any other adults involved in the child's parenting, and decide on a consistent approach.
- If you can't think of what to say, or are unsure how much information to tell your child, try giving a little bit of information and see if they have more questions. There are lots of good books and websites that help you learn a little more about the correct names for body parts, or find good examples of how to explain different subjects.
- Decide which words you're going to use. If you prefer to use slang words like 'privates' or 'willy', remember that your child also needs to know the correct words for body parts such as the penis and vagina.
- Your child may sometimes put you on the spot when you don't have a ready reply. A phrase such as, 'What good question. Let's talk about that later,' can give you some time to think about what you're going to say. However, make sure you keep your word and talk about the issue.



## 'Playing doctor'

Curiosity about gender differences can lead to your child undressing with another preschooler. Suggestions include:

- Don't be angry or react in a horrified way if you find your child 'playing doctor'. Calm yourself and distract the children with another activity.
- With regards to 'playing doctor', tell them that looking at someone else's body is fine but touching should be avoided because genitals are private.
- This might be a good opportunity to talk about unwanted sexual touching. Tell your child that no one is allowed to touch their genitals, and that they should let you know straight away if somebody does.
- Further, explain that genitals are not for public display and that clothes need to stay on.

## Where babies come from

Young children are constantly busy figuring out how the world works, which includes how babies are made. Typical questions can include 'Where do babies come from?' and 'Can men have babies too?'. Suggestions include:

- Treat their questions about reproduction like you would any other request for information about how things work. Be calm, honest and factual.
- Avoid fanciful explanations like 'The stork brings the baby,' or 'Babies are found in cabbage patches'.
- Keep your answers simple. There's no need to go into a detailed explanation of human reproduction. For example, if your child asks for the first time where babies come from, say something like 'a baby grows in its mummy's tummy'.
- Explain the details slowly and in small chunks, as time goes on. For example, you may follow up by saying: 'When the baby is big enough, it comes out through a passage in the mummy's body called the vagina'.
- Your own pregnancy, the pregnancy of a friend or even pets giving birth are opportunities that can help clarify the process for your child.

## Sexual intercourse

Your child may ask, 'How does the baby get in there in the first place?'. This is the topic that most parents would prefer to leave out of their young child's sex education, but don't be evasive. It is far better to respond truthfully to their questions. Suggestions include:

- Once again, keep your explanations simple but factual. Be guided by your child's questions - if they want more information or greater detail, give it to them.
- Use picture books to help explain human anatomy.
- It may help if you read age-appropriate books on sex together with your child. If your child has questions, answer them honestly and simply.
- Question your child about sex, because their answers will let you know whether they understand or not.





### What to do if your child expresses no interest

While many young children ask questions about sexual issues, some don't. Suggestions include:

- Don't leave it. If your child hasn't any interest or curiosity, broach the topic yourself.
- Look for everyday opportunities to get the conversation started - for example, the pregnancy of a friend or relative.
- Have age-appropriate sex education books in the house and read them together like you would any other story. Answer their questions as they arise.

### Things to remember

- Children who have a clear understanding of sexual issues are more likely to behave responsibly, for example, by waiting until they are older before they start having sex, and choosing to use contraceptives.
- If you cringe or change the subject whenever your child mentions a sexual issue, you'll give them the idea that it's wrong to discuss such things with you.
- Read age-appropriate books on sex together with your child.



This newsletter has been issued by:

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Please note that this information must not be used for diagnostic purposes. Please visit a medical professional for a correct diagnosis.