

Communicating about sexuality with children

**It is important that children receive positive messages about sexuality.
Parents, carers and schools can work together to promote healthy attitudes.**

In the past, few people felt able to talk to their children about sexual matters. At most, children received 'The Talk' or perhaps a book under the pillow just before puberty. It is not surprising that some adults might find sexuality an embarrassing and difficult subject to talk about.

Today most parents and carers want their children to feel more positive about their sexuality as they grow up. They recognise the lifelong benefits of communicating openly and honestly with their children about these matters.

Why is learning about sexuality important?

Children live in a world where they receive sexual messages daily from television, films, music, advertising, computer games, the internet and from their friends. Sex is often joked about and discussed in a derogatory or stereotyped way. It's important that children receive positive messages about sexuality.

Generally, children who receive relationships and sexuality education from an early age:

- understand and accept physical and emotional changes with confidence
- feel positive about their bodies
- appreciate and accept individual differences
- are more likely to make informed and responsible sexual decisions later in life
- feel good about themselves as male or female
- are capable of communicating about sexual matters
- understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviour
- are less vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse

Won't they lose their innocence?

This question stems from the belief that information about sexuality is dirty or wrong. Children who are well informed about sexuality are less likely

to feel guilty or shameful about their bodies or their sexual thoughts because they will understand their feelings and know what is and is not OK for them. This in turn will also help protect them from sexual exploitation and abuse. Sexuality education can actually help to maintain innocence. Innocence means freedom from guilt or shame, whereas ignorance means lacking knowledge or information.

If they know about sex, won't they start experimenting at an earlier age?

In fact the opposite is true. Young people who have received ongoing and effective relationships and sexuality education are more likely to delay sexual intercourse. Evidence shows that when they do become sexually active they're more likely to use contraception and to protect themselves and their partner by practicing safe sex.

When should I start?

You already have! Children start to learn about sexuality from the day they are born.

Children learn by:

- observing the way people around them relate to each other
- the way they are spoken to
- how they are touched
- how they are played with

It is important to help your children feel good about their sexuality from the very beginning. This way they will be more likely to ask questions and seek your help or advice.

Communicating about sexuality is an ongoing responsibility, not just a one-off talk.

As with other subjects such as road safety, maths or painting, information about sexuality should be given in an age appropriate response. One or two lessons are not enough.

Information needs to be continually reinforced. Don't worry. Whatever age your children are, it's never too late to start. Let them know this is an important subject and one that you are happy to talk to them about.

How do I start?

When it comes to talking about sexuality, people are often embarrassed. If you feel embarrassed or uncomfortable, talk about this with your child. You could say something like "I'm finding this a little difficult because no one ever spoke openly to me about sexuality when I was growing up, but this is an important subject so I really want to talk to you." This way your child will not think this subject is an inappropriate one to ask about or that you are trying to opt out. They will respect you for your honesty.

How do I answer their questions?

If your child asks a lot of questions about sexuality, that's great. Answer them simply and honestly and give enough information to adequately answer their question. If they want more information they will ask another question. For example, a four year old might ask *Where do babies come from?* or *How does the baby get out?* Regardless of your child's age it's best to keep your answers brief, factual and positive.

If you're asked a question that you're not sure how to answer, a good strategy is to ask the child a question in return, such as *What made you think of that?* or *Do you like talking about...?* This will give you a little time to think of an answer and to help establish what they already know. Sometimes questions can be quite unclear, so seek clarification whenever necessary. If you don't know an answer, say so, then you could find out the answer together.

Inappropriate times and places

Sometimes children ask questions at very awkward times or places, such as the supermarket, sitting in a crowded bus, in front of their grandparents, or perhaps when you are just too busy. When this happens, tell them their question or comment is very interesting and important. It is one that is better discussed in a more private place, when you are alone together or when you are not so rushed. Always make sure you do follow up when the time is more appropriate.

What if they don't ask questions?

Some children just don't ask a lot of questions, but this doesn't mean they aren't interested. They may have picked up the message that this isn't an OK subject to ask about. If this is the case you will need to bring up the subject yourself. By doing this you are giving the clear message that this is a subject you are happy and willing to discuss. There are lots of opportunities you can use to get things started. It could be a friend or relative is pregnant, a pet may have babies, an issue may be raised on television or in the newspaper or perhaps an older brother or sister is going through puberty. Use the situation to raise the subject. You may wish to ask your child what they know already and then build on this knowledge.

Sometimes children, particularly at puberty, indicate that they don't want to listen or that they know it all. Perhaps you could ask them to do you a favour and discuss it for a few minutes anyway. Make it clear that you need to talk about it with them, even if they don't feel the need to discuss it.

Another way to prompt discussion and provide information is to have a number of books about sexuality for children. Check at bookshops, your local library or visit www.true.org.au. For very young children, providing appropriate puzzles and games or anatomically correct dolls will encourage them to learn while they play.

Use correct terminology

We call an arm an arm and a nose a nose, so it makes sense to call a penis, vulva, vagina or breast by its correct name as well. By doing this we normalise these words and don't single out these parts of the body as being different. By using commonly used and accepted words we can also provide our children with a vocabulary they can use in any situation. This will assist them both in childhood and adulthood to communicate about these parts of their body.

Can I give them too much information?

Your child will only take in as much information as they are able to understand. The worst outcome of giving too much information is that your child may become bored and switch off. Take the cues from your child. If their eyes have glazed over and they stop following your answer with a question, they have probably heard enough – for today anyway!

Remember not to turn each discussion into a lecture, but to listen and ask them questions in return.

Information alone isn't enough

Giving information is important. Children also benefit from open discussions about feelings, values and attitudes. At every opportunity discuss with your children what you believe and why. Let them know that there is a range of beliefs about sexuality issues. If your values and attitudes are consistent, your child is likely to take on similar beliefs. Encouraging them to analyse different opinions and to consider benefits, disadvantages and consequences that will help them develop their own values and feel confident about what they believe. They will be more likely to stand up for their beliefs and rights and be assertive when necessary.

Give your child the opportunity to develop decision making skills by allowing them to make choices.

Remember, they won't always be the right ones, but this is all part of the learning process. How can adolescents be assertive and make responsible decisions if they have never been given the opportunity? They may be as simple as what to wear or what to have for breakfast. With practice they will grow up confident in their ability to make decisions and stand by them.

Keep the messages positive when you discuss your experiences of periods, wet dreams, childbirth, relationships or adolescence.

To encourage positive feelings about body image, try not to criticise your own appearance or the appearance of others.

Whenever possible, use your sense of humour. While children need to be aware that this is an important subject, they should also be able to develop skills and get information in a positive and enjoyable way.

In conclusion

Parents and carers play a vital role in communicating with children about sexuality. Be aware of yourself as a role model. Children learn by example. They will learn to be loving, honest and caring by observing this behaviour in others. Respecting and valuing your children will in turn teach them to respect and value others.

Most of all let your child know how much you love them. Credit them for their talent, personality, appearance and accomplishments. Believing in them will help them believe in themselves and to feel positive and confident about all aspects of their lives, including their sexuality.

Visit www.true.org.au for details of other useful resources.

References

Baldo, M., Aggleton, P., & Slutkin, G. (1993). *Sex Education Does Not Lead to Earlier or Increased Sexual Activity in Youth*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization Global Programme on AIDS.

Disclaimer

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