

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 activity. 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
- observing relationships around them

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 or maths, information about sexuality should be given in an age-appropriate response. One or two conversations 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?

People are often embarrassed talking about sexuality, however the sooner you begin talking about it, the easier it is. If you feel embarrassed or uncomfortable 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 "That is a great question....." 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. This could be a good opportunity to teach your child how to use the internet safely.

Unsuitable 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 to 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 discuss it for a few minutes. You want them to know that you are happy to discuss the topic with them.

Another way to prompt discussion and provide information is to have a few 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 and will also provide them with language to tell trusted adults when something is wrong.

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. Discuss with your children what you believe and why. Let them know that there are a range of beliefs about sexuality issues. 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.

Online and Social Media.

Children have increased access to the Internet and social media than previous generations. This access puts children at a risk of exposure to explicit sexual images, and violence.

It's important to let children know that they can talk to their parents if they are worried about anything they see online. Teaching children how to treat people with kindness and respect not only in person but online can also be valuable in children developing healthy online behaviours. Take moments to challenge any negative messages they may receive online about body image and gender stereotypes. Further, find opportunities to show your children how to use the internet safely. If, for example, they ask you a question and you don't know an answer, say so, and find out the answer together. Remember your children are learning from you on social media.

Gender Stereotypes.

Parents are an important foundation for children in relation to developing their own values and attitudes. As parents, you can role model gender equality and respectful relationships. Where opportunities arise, challenge stereotypes about gender roles and judgemental attitudes about behaviours. In challenging gender stereotypes and discriminatory behaviour, we can allow children to be free to be themselves, ensuring they are treated equally, and respectfully.

Inclusion and diversity.

From a very young age, children start to gain a sense of their identity. Through creative play and role-play, reflections, and interactions with peers, children will discover who they are.

Children will begin to have questions about their identity as they further develop. This can be a time when children may ask questions about their sexuality and what gender may mean.

For parents, learning about sexual and gender diversity can bring comfort, confidence, and readiness when conversing with children about these topics. It may be helpful to be familiar with the following language:

Sex may be used as a term to describe biological sex characteristics. Most people are assigned male or female at birth. This is commonly related to the physical presentation of genitals, but can also involve other sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones. Some people “may have innate sex characteristics that don’t fit medical and social norms for female or male bodies: The term for this is intersex.

Sexual orientation is a term used to relate to a person’s emotional attraction or sexual attraction to others. This usually develops during puberty.

Gender identity refers to how a person feels on the inside and their sense of self. This may not align with their physical sex or how they look. Someone’s gender identity could be as boy/man, girl/woman, both (non-binary), fluid among genders, or no gender.

Gender expression is how a person may present their gender which can be through the way they look, act, and behave. The use of names and pronouns (he/his, she/her, they/them) may also be included. Gender expression may be described as feminine, masculine, androgynous, conforming, or non-conforming. Someone’s gender identity cannot be assumed based on their gender expression.

Support Strategies.

Because children care about what parents think it is important to have an open mind, be supportive and warm when addressing conversations about gender or sexuality, ensuring you provide inclusive information on diverse bodies and sexualities. Remember it’s never too early or late to start talking about these topics. It is possible they will have heard things online or from social media, or peers, and don’t understand what they mean.

Children may also bring up these conversations themselves which takes a lot of courage to do this. They may feel confused or feel awkward about their feelings. Being available and caring will give them chance to talk and ask questions.

Take opportunities to have teachable moments with children when watching movies, news, music, or TV which may have themes of gender and sexuality. Consider the words or phrases that you use for example referring to partner rather than boyfriend or girlfriend or parent rather than mum or dad.

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, and accomplishments. Believing in them will help them believe in themselves and feel positive and confident about all aspects of their lives, including their sexuality.

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

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