

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT SEX



Sex is often a very difficult topic for parents to discuss with their children. However, the importance of creating an open climate for discussing sex with children is very important in children's development of healthy attitudes about sex and sexuality.

Children first learn about sexuality from their parents, whether their parents discuss sex with them or not. They start learning about sexuality by watching their parents interact, by listening to them, and observing how they react to sexual behavior and messages (e.g., in television and movies). Thus, parents have a responsibility for educating their children about sex. Parents should also set a good example regarding sexuality. Parents with healthy attitudes about sex will

likely pass this attitude on to their children.

Parents who avoid discussing the topic of sex with their children are doing their children a disservice. Such children may get the idea that sex is bad, which can affect them throughout their lives. Such children may seek information elsewhere, and this information can be incomplete or erroneous.

This handout contains information to help parents tackle the difficult task of discussing sex with their children.

Discussing Sex

Here are some things parents should consider with regard to discussing sex and sexuality with their children:

***Discuss sex at an appropriate level.** When discussing sex with their children, parents should keep in mind their children's level of maturity. Parents should gear explanations towards their children's level of understanding. For younger children, language should be kept simple, and sentences short.

***Start early.** Parents should begin discussing sex, not just intercourse, but maturation, body parts, etc., while their children are young. Children will be curious about sex beginning at an early age. The better parents handle these early discussions, the easier it will be to discuss these topics when their children are older. Children who have discussed these things with their parents are more comfortable with the subject, and are thus more likely to approach parents with questions and problems that might occur at a later time.

***Be available.** Parents should let their children know, in both words and actions, that they are available to answer any questions that their children might have.

***Treat the topic of sex matter-of-factly.** When discussing sex with their children, parents should try to treat these discussions as they would any other important topic - calmly and matter-of-factly. Children are very perceptive, and they will be able to tell if their parents are uncomfortable with the topic of sex. If children sense that their parents are uncomfortable with the topic of sex, they will be less likely to come to their parents with problems and questions later on.

Children might also be led to believe that sex is bad or wrong, or a taboo subject.

***Don't wait until children ask about sex.** Parents should be the ones to initiate discussions about sex. Children will then feel more comfortable bringing up the topic at a later time. Some parents might think that the subject is a hard one to bring up. Parents can, however, use every day occurrences as opportunities to discuss sex. For example, when children are young, parents can use diaper changing time to point out and name the genitalia and other body parts (always use the correct names). If a child happens to notice a pregnant woman and comments on the size of her stomach, parents can use this as an opening to discuss procreation. When children begin going through puberty, parents can mention that they notice the changes in their children (e.g. voice changes, breast development) and use this as an opening to further discuss the changes that take place in one's body during adolescence. There are many opportunities in every day life for parents to discuss sex with their children.

***Use age-appropriate books, movies and television shows as**

supplements for discussions about sex. There are many good books and videos available about sex which are designed for children of different ages. Parents should always preview materials to make sure the information presented fits with their beliefs about sex. Parents should never provide these materials to their children without following up with a discussion of the information and providing an opportunity for questions.

***Always label body parts with their correct names.** From the beginning, parents should label all body parts, including the sexual organs, with their correct names. Just as parents would point out and name the eyes, ears, and nose, they should do the same for the penis, vagina, breasts, etc. Using the correct names from the very beginning will lead to less confusion for children.

***Respect children's privacy and teach children to respect others' privacy.** When children are old enough to bathe alone, toilet alone, and dress themselves alone, they should be allowed to do so if they desire. Parents should respect their children's need for privacy. At the same time, parents should teach

their children to respect their privacy, too.

***Answer children's questions about sex directly and honestly.** Children can often sense when their questions are being evaded or when they are being told untruths. Children who are told untruths by their parents will very likely begin to feel that their parents are not to be trusted. They may also be led to believe that sex is something mysterious and scary, and not to be discussed openly. Also, children are more likely to be open and honest with parents who are open and honest with them.

***Don't ignore or brush off children's questions about sex.** Parents should make an effort to answer their children's questions about sex, even if they feel uncomfortable. If children sense discomfort in parents, they might be led to believe that sex is bad, dirty, or something that shouldn't be talked about.

***Educate yourself about sex education.** Parents should try to learn as much as they can about sex education so they will be able to openly and honestly answer their children's questions. Also, the more parents know about various sex topics, the more comfortable they

will be answering their children's questions. This knowledge should include information about all aspects of sex, including reproduction, sexual organs, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, etc.

***Prepare yourself.** It might help, especially if parents are uncomfortable about the topic of sex, to prepare for the inevitability of children's questions. Parents should try to figure out in advance how the topic of sex will be handled. It might help to practice explanations before they take place.

***Repeat explanations.** Children need to hear information about sex more than once. Education about sex is an ongoing process, and children will probably need to hear this information many times before it begins to sink in.

***Express values.** Parents should be sure to include their own thoughts and feelings about sex in their discussions with their children. Children need to know what their parents think about sexual issues, in addition to the facts.

Discussing Sex with Pre-Schoolers

Children begin to develop an awareness of their own bodies and an

interest in sexuality at an early age. Parents should keep in mind that this is a normal process. Here are some things parents can do to instill healthy ideas about sexuality in their pre-school aged children:

***Don't punish children for touching their own genitalia.** Young children have a great curiosity about their own bodies. It is quite normal for them to touch and handle their own genitalia. Instead of punishing and shaming children for this normal behavior, parents should treat it matter of factly. As children approach school age, they should be taught that while touching one's private parts is okay, it is something that is to be done in a private place, like in the bathroom or in the child's bedroom.

***Explain what private parts are and what body privacy means.** While children are young, parents should teach their children that private parts are private, and that nobody else should touch them. This is also a good time to let children know that they should come to you or another trusted adult if anyone does try to touch their private parts.

***Explain sex differences.** Pre-school aged children are very

curious about the differences between boys and girls. Parents should explain these differences to their children. Parents should explain that little boys have penises and that little girls have vaginas, etc.

Discussing Sex with Grade-School-Aged Children

As children get older, they will need and desire more detailed explanations about sex. Here are some things parents should discuss with their grade-school-aged children:

***Procreation.** Children this age will probably be very curious about how babies are made. Parents should include in their explanations how babies grow inside their mothers, how babies get inside their mother's bodies, and how fertilization takes place when the sperm and the ovum unite. When explaining these facts to their children, parents should avoid referring to the sperm as a seed and the ovum as an egg. Such explanations can be very confusing to children. Parents should also avoid using examples in nature to explain sex to their children. Instead, they should explain how the process takes place, using appropriate labels and language. Children also need to know that

babies grow in the mother's uterus, not her stomach, and that it takes about nine months for a baby to grow. Parents should repeat this explanation often over the years. Children need to hear these things many times before they develop a real understanding.

***Menstruation.** Girls need to learn about menstruation, preferably from their mothers, before their first period, which often comes around ten or eleven years of age. It can be a frightening experience for a young girl to begin bleeding and not know why. Boys also need to know about menstruation, too.

***Masturbation.** Children need to understand that masturbation is natural and normal.

Discussing Sex with Adolescents

Adolescents are sometimes difficult to talk to, but discussing sex shouldn't be difficult if this is a topic that has been brought up and discussed many times since the child was very young. Here are some things parents should consider when discussing sex with adolescents.

***Don't assume children already know about sex.** Parents who have not yet discussed sex with their

adolescents should not assume that they already know about it, or will be taught about it in school. Often children this age know some things about sex, but the information they have is often not complete, or it is erroneous (for example, they might believe that a woman can not get pregnant the first time she has sexual intercourse).

***Don't wait until children are in their teens to discuss sex.** As mentioned before, parents should begin discussing sex with their children while their children are very young. This will make the topic much easier for parents to approach when their children are older. It will also help children feel more comfortable coming to parents with questions that they might have, too.

***If parents have waited, remember that it's never too late.** It is never too late for parents to open a discussion about sex with their children. Providing information when children are older is much, much better than providing no information at all.

***Teach responsibility and self control.** Parents should teach their adolescents that they are responsible for their own bodies and their own actions.

***Don't overrestrict.** Parents who are too restrictive with their adolescents may cause their children to rebel.

***Teach that sex is natural.** Parents should make sure their children know that sex is natural and normal within a committed, loving, mature relationship, and not dirty or evil. Parents should not worry that such an explanation will promote promiscuity in their children. In fact children are less likely to listen to their parents if their parents try to make them feel that sex is bad or dirty.

***Teach that sex is not just intercourse.** Adolescents need to know that there is a lot more to sex than intercourse. Adolescents need to know that a sexual relationship is best when it takes place between two people who are committed to each other, are mature enough to handle the consequences, and when intimacy is allowed to develop gradually.

***Teach that sexual intimacy has profound consequences.** Parents should make sure that their children know that sexual intimacy carries with it the risk of pregnancy, the risk of sexually transmitted

diseases, and the risk of emotional hurt.

***Teach about contraception.** Children need to know about the various ways to avoid pregnancy. Again, parents can explain contraception to their children without advocating sexual activity. Children also need to know about sexually transmitted diseases and how to avoid them.

***Teach children that it's okay to say no to sex until they're ready.** Parents should make sure their children know that they are responsible for their own bodies, and they should not do anything that they do not feel completely comfortable about. Parents should explain that adolescents often face a lot of pressure to have sex before they are ready, but that they should never let anyone pressure them into doing something they do not want to do.

***Teach children that sex is not the most important part of a loving relationship.** Children need to know that there are many parts of an intimate relationship that are much more important than sex, such as commitment, mutual respect, compatibility, and love.

***Express values.** Parents should remember to include their own thoughts and feelings about sex in their discussions with their children. Children need to know what their parents think about sexual issues, in addition to the facts.

***Make sure you let children know often that they can come to you with any problems, questions, or concerns, no matter what.** Parents need to let their adolescent know frequently that they are always available to discuss any questions or concerns their children may have, no matter what.



Center for Effective Parenting
Little Rock Center: (501) 364-7580
NW Arkansas Center: (479) 751-6166

www.parenting-ed.org