

Beyond the Birds and the Bees: How to Talk With Children About Sexuality

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Most young children are naturally curious about sexual issues. They may engage in various types of sexual play, or ask direct questions about sexuality. However, sexual interest on the part of children may leave parents shocked, worried, or embarrassed, not knowing how to react, or what to say. Parents often cringe at the thought of talking to their children about sex, especially when their child is still a preschooler. Many of us find it difficult to discuss sex calmly with our children, wondering where to start and what to say. In order to help with some of the confusion, we offer the following 10 guidelines for approaching the topic of sexuality with your children:

1. **Start early.** Child development experts agree that parents should start talking to their children about sexual issues when the children are still very young. For example, in infancy, start by teaching the correct names for all body parts, including their genitals. With toddlers, talk about the difference between boys and girls, and about appropriate affection. This gives children the message that sex is an acceptable topic of conversation, and that they can come to their parents with questions about sex when they are curious or confused instead of relying on information from friends and the media. It is important to establish a comfort level with the topic of sexuality for yourself and your children early on, and not put off the "big talk" until puberty. Children usually have sexual thoughts and feelings long before they become teenagers, and talking to them about sex early on, while they still look at parents as the "experts," helps them understand those feelings, and prepares them to make healthy decisions later.
2. **Talk often.** Learning about sexuality is a gradual, ongoing process from infancy to the teenage years. It requires that parents talk about sexuality again and again as children become ready to absorb more information, and to build on the knowledge they already have. By approaching the issue when your children are still toddlers, you will have the opportunity to talk first about more comfortable issues like love and relationships, and then, as they get older, to build on that information by discussing more difficult issues such as sexual behavior, risks and responsibility.
3. **Remember that it's okay to feel uncomfortable.** It is normal for parents to feel uncomfortable talking to children about sexuality, especially if your family never talked about sex as you were growing up. But, by avoiding such conversations, you will indirectly give them the message that you are not willing to talk, and that they should seek out other sources of information. Don't let personal discomfort stop you from discussing important issues with your children. Make a conscious effort to relax when the topic of sexuality comes up. Children can often sense parental discomfort, and may then avoid coming to you with questions about sex. It can be helpful to admit to your children that you are a little uncomfortable with the topic but that nothing is ever too hard to talk about with them, and that you are always willing to answer their questions.
4. **Be an "ask-able" parent.** Reward your child's questions about sexuality by saying, "I'm glad you came to me with that question." If you don't know the answer to their question immediately, tell them that you will find out and get back to them. Suggest finding the answer together, by reading a book or looking up information on the internet. This will teach children that they can come to you again when they have other questions in the future.
5. **Find "teachable moments."** Many preschoolers openly play with their genitals around other people, especially during times of rest. Occasional genital touching is normal and nothing to worry about. Children do it simply because it feels good. It is not physically harmful, and does not cause emotional problems unless parents overreact and give children the message that sex is dirty, harmful, or frightening. When you see your child masturbating, use it as an opportunity to focus on both *pleasure* and *privacy* issues. You may want to say something like, "I understand that touching your penis/vulva (or whatever term you use in your family) makes you feel good, and it is perfectly all right to do that privately in the bedroom, but not around other people." When you find your child undressed, playing doctor with another child or even trying to imitate sexual activity, such as lying on top of another child, try not to overreact with shock and anger. Instead, explain that you understand their curiosity about other people's bodies, but just as others shouldn't be sexually touching them, they shouldn't be sexually touching

others. Emphasize that it is okay for your child to touch him/herself in private but that it's never okay for others, even friends, to touch them that way. To satisfy your child's curiosity about what bodies look like, suggest getting an age-appropriate book that has simple illustrations, and reading it together with your child.

6. ***Don't wait until your children ask questions.*** Some children never ask. Just like you teach them about traffic safety and good citizenship without children having to ask you questions about it, you need to decide what you think is important for them to know about sexuality, and then tell them before a crisis occurs. There is no harm in talking to children about sexuality in age-appropriate ways, even if your child appears to have no interest in the topic, or seems embarrassed. Research shows that talking about sex does NOT make children and teenagers more likely to engage in sexual activity, whereas withholding information until you think your child is "ready" can increase the chance that children will explore more on their own, go to others with less knowledge or different values than you, or accept inaccurate information as fact.
7. ***Use movies, TV shows, and commercials as opportunities to talk.*** Our children are already exposed to lots of sexual information through peers and media. Not talking to them about these issues only increases the risk that they will grow up with misinformation about sex which can make it more likely for them to experiment and take risks. When you see sexual behavior on TV, such as two people passionately kissing each other, ask your children what they think is happening, then explain that this is something that grown-ups do when they love each other, and that they do it because it feels good, and because it helps them feel closer.
8. ***Find out what they already know.*** When a child asks a question about sex, a good way to respond may be by saying, "What do YOU think?" Not only does this give you a little bit of time to think about the answer you want to give, but it will also show you what your child already knows about the topic, and will give you a better idea of what they really want to know, and why. This information may help you prepare a better answer for your child. For example, when a 4-year-old asks where babies come from, he or she probably is not looking for an explanation about eggs, sperm, and intercourse. Instead, they may only be interested in the fact that babies grow inside a mom's body in a special place called a "uterus." The same question from an 8-year-old, who already has a lot more knowledge about the topic, will require a different, more complex answer. Let your child be the guide as to how much information you need to give. Keep your answers short and simple at first, and see whether your child wants more information at that time.
9. ***Don't just talk about the "mechanics."*** Go beyond the "birds and the bees." It's not enough for children to just learn the basic "facts of life." In your discussions, share your beliefs, feelings and values about sexuality. Tell your children why you feel the way you do. Again, do this while they are still young and are willing to listen to you as the "expert." Hearing you talk about your values regarding sexuality (e.g., how your religious beliefs influence how you think about sexuality, at what age you believe people are ready to have sex, or whether you think that sex should only occur in committed relationships) prepares children to make responsible choices later on. Studies have found that children whose parents regularly discussed sexuality with them before puberty were more likely to delay sexual activity as teenagers, and showed fewer risky sexual behaviors.
10. ***Talk about the joys of sexuality.*** Too often, we only teach children how NOT to be sexual by imposing rules for what NOT to do, or teaching only about the risks involved in sexual activity, such as diseases, AIDS, or unwanted pregnancy. Children may get the impression that sex is something "dirty" or scary to be avoided, and that having sexual thoughts and feelings is wrong. It is crucial for parents to tell children that sexual feelings are a natural and pleasurable part of life from birth to death, that sexuality is about love, relationships, and intimacy, and that sex within a loving relationship is a wonderful part of adult life.

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