

Sexuality: Successful Communication Between Parents and Their Children

Educating your children about sex can be one of the most challenging and awkward steps of parenting. However, research shows engaging children about these issues instead of putting them off may help prevent premature sexual activity, teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases. As a parent, it may be difficult for you to decide on the right time to talk to your children about sex, and many parents wait until they are confronted by their son or daughter about these issues. As you may feel uncomfortable or unsure about what to say to your children, here are some tips to help with your discussion.

Preschool

Before jumping to the pre-teen and teen years, let's start from the beginning, since even young children may ask about sex-related topics, such as body parts, pregnancy, etc. There are many sources of information which can influence your child's understanding of sex such as television, movies, music, and peers. For this reason, parents should provide their children with age appropriate answers to their questions starting at an early age; importantly, this helps distinguish you as someone they can turn to about these types of questions.

- Young children have a tendency to be curious about their own bodies. Take this time, perhaps during bath time, to help them understand the different parts of their anatomy. Don't be afraid to say "penis" or "vagina" to prevent negative associations with their bodies. It is important that you express which parts of their bodies are private and which are okay to show in public.
- A child's curiosity may lead to masturbatory behavior, even in a public setting. While this behavior is normal for children, parents should express to their child that this is not acceptable in public; the message and tone is not that the behavior is wrong but rather it is private.
- Communicate to your children that their genitalia should not be exposed to others, nor should anyone other than a physician, nurse, or parent be allowed to touch their private areas. Talk to them about "good touch" and "bad touch," letting them know if they ever feel bad about touch they should tell their parent or a trusted adult. While the vast majority of interest in bodies is perfectly normal, parents should be aware that a child's overenthusiastic interest in sexuality could be linked to sexual abuse. Consulting with a pediatrician or psychologist can be helpful if you have such concerns.
- When preschool children see someone pregnant, it may prompt them to ask how pregnancy occurs. Like all questions at this age, the trick is answering honestly but in a way they can understand, and realizing they don't need full information yet and probably won't even notice you've left out the details. For example, one answer to this question would be: When a man and a woman are grownups there is a special grown up hug they can do that make babies.
- Take a minute to listen to the content of questions, as some questions seemingly about sex may not be at all. In one family a preschool child made a group of adults quiet quickly when she asked upon meeting her aunt's new husband for the

first time if they slept together. The aunt cautiously replied, “Yes,” to which the child said happily, “Oh good!” When the aunt asked why that was good, the child explained, “Now I know who he is. Like mom and dad sleep together, grandma and grandpa sleep together...” The child knows nothing of sex, but a couple sleeping together tells her something about the relationship, that it is close and special.

Elementary School

Elementary school brings about another series of questions which children may ask their parents concerning sex. Children may ask more about the connection between sex and having babies and sex and love. Around the pre-teen age, children’s bodies begin to develop, which can be very confusing. Here are some tips to help you better communicate with your child.

- There is quite a difference in this group when we look for example from first grade to fifth and sixth grade. With younger children, continue the advice from above in the preschool section, i.e., answer questions honestly but only with as much detail as the child seems to be pulling for.
- You may find yourself answering questions earlier than you had imagined because an older child at school informs a group of younger children about the birds and the bees! Stay calm and listen at first; see how much your child has been told before you start your answer. Often the child’s biggest concern is that an older child is making fun of them and perhaps trying to get them to believe something that isn’t true, or similarly showing the child is a “baby” because he or she doesn’t know the facts of life. Whatever your child has been told about sex that is true, confirm as true, and correct any misconceptions the child has been given.
- An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. In the pre-teen years (perhaps ages 11-12), if your child is asking questions about having sex, you may want to take this time to begin to discuss contraception and STDs. Express your concern for their well-being and need to protect and respect their bodies and others.
- Some children may begin to experience puberty as pre-teens. Both males and females should be knowledgeable of menstruation, male and female genitalia responses, and breast development in order to better understand the changes occurring in their own bodies as well as others. Particularly with girls, as it can be scary if they begin menstruation not knowing it is going to occur, so most experts would say girls should know about this by age 11 or 12 at the latest.

Junior High School/ High School

Junior high school and high school children go through the most difficult sexual pressures. Now is the time when parents are able to bond with their child through open communication about sexual relationships. Being the one to answer all of those confusing and embarrassing questions is perhaps one of the most important roles parents can play during this phase of their child’s life.

- Parents should work together to educate their children. Children may be curious about the changes the other gender experiences. It can be helpful to get both a mother's and a father's perspective on sex and sexual development.
- Assure them that the physiological changes they are going through are completely normal. All of his or her peers are experiencing the same insecurities, difficulties and curiosity they feel. There is no need to feel they are unusual or weird.
- Teen pregnancy is becoming more common each year, but few children know how devastating this can be for their futures, particularly girls. Encourage your child to use contraception if they are going to engage in sexual activity but to also be aware that using them does not guarantee they will prevent getting pregnant. Alert them to which ones only protect against pregnancy and which prevent both pregnancy and STDs. Suggesting abstinence as an alternative to sex is also recommended. Let your child know sex has emotional aspects that can be complicated and are better handled as an adult. The overall message is that sex has practical and emotional consequences and for your child to delay sexual activity and particularly intercourse until older.
- Keep the lines of communication open. As a parent, it can be difficult to remain calm when you find out your child has done something of which you do not approve. Overreacting can sometimes cause more harm than good. If you yell at your child for one sexually related issue, they are less likely to come to you when they may have a more serious one. Address them with a cool-tempered, but genuinely concerned attitude to motivate change without turning them away.
- Let your child know how you feel about sex. Knowing how a mature adult views sex can create a healthy role model for them to follow. They will then be better able to assimilate your beliefs and knowledge into their own personal views; however do not be surprised if they do not share your perspectives.
- Parents should alert their children to stressful situations in which they may feel pressured to engage in sexual activity. It is crucial that parents prepare their child to say "no." Encourage them to develop an assertive language regarding saying "no" to intercourse and other sexual activity.
- Parents should discuss with their child strategies for handling their feelings of sexual desire. If you are going to be encouraging them to say no to sex then it is helpful to discuss openly situations in which this will be difficult. Do not shame the child or make his or her sexual desire seem bad or wrong; conversely, let your child know desire is normal and that thinking in advance about how to choose not to engage in sex even in the face of desire helps one be prepared for the moment.
- Let your children know that in a secure, mature relationship sex is a wonderful, bonding, and fun part of intimacy! If you make sex sound all bad, i.e., pregnancy, disease, a "bad" reputation, etc., they may tune you out completely. Instead, explain that when they are older sex will be a wonderful part of their relationships, and you just want to encourage them to wait and bring sex into their lives at the time when they are best prepared to handle all of the complicated aspects of it.

References

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