

Let's Talk

Let's Talk: Tips for Talking With Your Children about Sexuality

As parents, we really make a difference when we talk with our kids about sex. In fact, teens often name their parents as the biggest influence in their decisions about sex. Teens who report having positive conversations with their parents about sex are more likely to delay sex, have fewer partners, and use condoms and other forms of birth control when they do have sex.

We can help our kids deal with topics related to sexuality starting when they are very young and throughout their lives. Sexuality includes a wide range of topics such as male and female bodies and how they work, human development, reproduction, types of relationships, what makes a relationship healthy or unhealthy, sexual behavior, and how to prevent pregnancy and STDs.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR MAKING IT EASIER TO TALK WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY

- **Think ahead about the values and messages that you want to give your children.** Thinking through our own values about sexuality can help us be clear when we talk with our children. For example, a common topic that comes up with children is the difference between boys and girls or men and women. Some parents might want to convey the feeling that boys and girls are mostly the same except for some body parts, and that boys and girls can do the same things. Other parents may want to express the belief that boys and girls are quite different from one another in many ways.
- **Give truthful, useful, and accurate information.** It's important to convey our own values about sex and sexuality. It's also important to prepare our children to make responsible choices whenever they become sexually active. By age 19, seven in 10 teens have already had intercourse. So in addition to conveying our own values regarding sexual relationships, it's important to talk with teens about preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.
- **Forget "the talk."** Talking with children about sexuality is a lifelong conversation. It's best to start talking with children early, when they are curious about their bodies, being a boy or girl, and different kinds of relationships. Their curiosity creates a natural opportunity to begin the conversation and start building a respectful and trusting relationship. For young children, we can start by teaching them the names of their body parts or asking them if they know why girls and boys look different. Doing a little bit at a time helps set realistic goals when we talk with our children. It also helps keep children from feeling overwhelmed. Don't worry if you haven't started yet. It's never too late. Just don't try to "catch up" all at once. The most important thing is to be open and available whenever a child wants to talk.
- **Don't be discouraged if you're uncomfortable.** It's common for parents and kids to feel embarrassed or uncomfortable when talking to one another about sex. Owning up to that can help relieve the tension. We might try saying, "It's totally normal that this feels awkward, but I love you and care about you so we need to talk about important things like this." In time and with practice, it will get easier.

- **Don't expect to know all the answers.** Some parents fear being asked information they don't know. It's perfectly fine not to know something, or not to have an immediate answer. One of the best ways we can teach our kids about sexuality is to find the answers together and talk about what we've learned. Seeking information together in books, online, or by asking others, can help build a trusting relationship and model how our kids can seek answers on their own.
- **Look for "teachable moments."** Every day, life provides lots of opportunities for talking about sexuality. When watching a TV show that features a young person going through puberty or going out on a date, seeing an ad that prompts thoughts about body acceptance, or running into a pregnant neighbor, we can use that to initiate conversations with our children. Having a starter can make the conversation more natural.
- **Make the conversation age appropriate.** Providing children with information that is age appropriate makes it easier for them to understand that sex and sexuality are a natural part of human and emotional development. It also makes it easier to talk with them about the more complex topics as they get older. If a five-year-old asks, "What is birth?" we might respond, "When a baby comes out of a mother's body." If a 10-year-old asks the same question, our answer would have more detail and might begin with, "After nine months of growing inside its mother's uterus, a baby comes out through her vagina."
- **Spend more time listening than talking, and get to know the world our children live in.** Listening to children shows that we're interested in and respect what they have to say. We don't always have to agree with what we hear, but it is important to pay attention to what they say, and try to understand their world. What pressures are they dealing with? What do they consider normal? It's often tempting to jump in and give our point of view, but if we spend some time just listening and asking questions, we help our children learn how to explain their ideas clearly. We get to know each other even better, and we build trust by showing we really care about our children's thoughts and feelings. We can show we understand our children's point of view by saying things like, "I think I see where you are coming from," or "I understand what you are feeling and I often felt that way when I was your age."
- **Try to understand what motivates teens.** It's important to communicate with kids about the importance of delaying sexual behavior until they are old enough to protect themselves and their partners. To do that well, it's helpful to understand and keep in mind the reasons teens give for having or delaying sex. Teens often cite a desire to feel closer to a boyfriend or girlfriend, or the erroneous belief that "everyone's doing it" as reasons for having sex. In contrast, they cite a fear of upsetting their parents or that sex will interfere with their future endeavors as reasons for delaying sex. We can talk with our teens about what motivates them around sex so we can better understand how to help them make the best choices for themselves.

- **Don't just talk.** Parents can follow a few simple guidelines that will make teens less likely to engage in risky behavior such as drinking, smoking, having unprotected sex, or having sex before they are ready:
 - ✓ We should know where our teens are and whom they are with, and we should not allow them to spend a lot of time alone without adults present.
 - ✓ When teens are invited to each other's house or to a party, we can find out if there are going to be adults present.
 - ✓ We can also discourage our teens from going out on school nights and dating or hanging out with older teens.
 - ✓ Our teens are less likely to engage in risky behavior if we know their friends' parents, so getting to know the parents of our kids' friends, and especially the parents of anyone our son or daughter is dating, is a good idea.

