

GULP!

Talking With Your Kids About Sexuality



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Focus on Reproduction

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*“Childhood’s learning is
made up of moments. It
isn’t steady. It’s a pulse.”*

—Eudora Welty

Ages 0 to 5: Setting the Stage

by Judy Cyprian

Where did I come from? may be a question parents dread hearing from their child, but it is a question that should be answered, and one that, in fact, may be fun to answer. Very young children are trying to make sense of the world around them, and consequently, some of them begin to wonder about themselves and such things as how they got here and where they were before they were born. These matters of curiosity deserve to be addressed, especially because children may be asking several things at once. Not only are they trying to figure out how they came to be, but they also want to know that they were not just plopped into a family who agreed to take care of them. They need to know that the family was excited when they thought about them before they were born and very much wanted to take care of them and love them. Letting your child know that you couldn’t wait to see her and learn all about her and raise her will help your child feel special, and is one of many ways to let her know how much she means to you.

Although it may feel a bit daunting, it is important to answer questions about sexuality. Give your child simple, honest answers. That gives him helpful information and lets him know that you will talk with him about the things that matter to him. Avoiding his questions sends the message that you don’t care about him, and that his thoughts and questions are wrong or bad. It is just as important to give your child the information that he is asking for as it is to let him know that it is okay to talk about sexuality with you. Before you know it, he will be coming back for more and he will learn that he can rely on you to help him understand his world. What could be better than that!

It is useful to remember a few things when talking with your child about where she came from. First of all, be sure you are clear about what she is asking. Does she want to know about reproduction or does she want to know that she was born in Vermont and not New York? The easiest way to figure out what your child is really asking is to ask her what she thinks. That way, you will know if she is wondering about making babies or something else. You will also get a sense of what your child knows, and can then go on to provide an answer that builds on her thoughts. Children often have wonderful and creative ideas about this subject and it can be really fun to hear what they are thinking.

What helps children understand this complicated question is a simple answer. Very young children can’t possibly grasp, and do not care about, a long and complicated answer. Something that is short and sweet will probably satisfy his curiosity without overwhelming and confusing him. If your child feels like he understands the answer, he will be more likely to return with more questions because you can answer them in a way that makes sense to him. An answer as simple as, “You came from Mom and Dad” can satisfy a child for quite some time. And if that answer is conveyed in a positive way, it also lets him know that he is welcome to come back with more questions when he is ready.

There is not one “right” answer to this question. Some parents may want to say, “You began by growing inside mommy’s body.” But other parents will want to answer in ways that make sense for their family. What counts with kids is that you answer their questions in a simple way which not only gives them information

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Ages 5 to 9: Getting Started

by Glenn Quint

Children entering elementary school are at a stage in their lives where their imaginations run wild, and for this reason, some of the most bizarre misconceptions can be formed concerning reproduction. Ask your friends if they remember some of their own misconceptions and you may hear things such as, “I thought when a woman gave birth, all this sand came out,” or “I didn’t think a pregnant woman could eat, what with that fetus growing in her stomach.”

Sand? There’s a simpler explanation for that than you might expect: as a child, this adult was told that the man had to “plant a seed” in order for a woman and a man to make a baby. In a child’s mind, can you think of a better place to plant a seed than in the sand? And the pregnant woman who couldn’t eat—a classic case of the term “tummy” being used instead of “womb” or “uterus” to describe the place where the fetus grows and develops. Tummies are also where we put food.

The challenge for parents of early elementary school-age children, then, is to provide simple and accurate information on reproduction that won’t be misinterpreted.

As these same children move up through elementary school, the challenges change. In second, third, and fourth grades, children become much more intellectually developed and, for the first time, are able to grasp all the basic facts about intercourse, conception, pregnancy, and the birth process. But while they may understand these concepts, they still do not understand the emotional and erotic feelings that are part of sexuality. Thus, they may assume that their parents have only had intercourse once or twice, for the sole purpose of producing children.

Children in this age group also begin to be preoccupied with being “normal” (this concern becomes more acute during puberty) and consequently are interested in all non-normal things, such as twins, Siamese twins, and in-vitro fertilization.

And finally, children this age may try out sex words (out loud, whispered, spelled, or written). There is also an interest in peeping and sexual jokes.

These changing behaviors and the new challenges they represent make your job as a parent all the more difficult, but not impossible. Let’s take a look at some of the specific things you can do to help your children understand the basics about reproduction, develop beliefs that are consistent with your own, and look to you for guidance when they’ve got questions or concerns about reproduction and other sexual issues.

First things first—you need to be clear about your own values regarding reproduction. Do you think sex should be for procreation purposes only? How do you feel about premarital sex? At what age are people ready to have sex? Is it okay for couples to use birth control? Different people have different answers for these questions, and how you talk with your child will depend, in part, upon your own values. So, before your child asks you why people are on TV are having sex even if they’re not married, take some time to

Myth:

Daughters need more sexuality education, especially information about contraception, than sons do.

consider your own values and the messages you want your children to receive about reproduction and other sexual matters. If there’s another parent or guardian in the picture, you don’t need to agree on all of the messages you want to give, just as long as you tell your children why you disagree and you don’t try to undermine the messages given by your partner.

Okay, now that you know what messages you want to give, you may be more

concerned with how to give them in a way that will be heard and accepted. First, choose the right time and place for talking about reproduction. Discussions go better in private and when everyone involved is in a relaxed, attentive mood. Most children don’t want their siblings in the room when you bring up this topic.

Second, the best way to start a discussion is to take advantage of “teachable moments,” those everyday events that provide a perfect opening. If you know someone who is pregnant, talk with your children about it. If you’re watching a television show or listening to music together, figure out if the contents might spark a conversation about reproduction. Avoid the direct, head-on approach—if you ask your children if they want to talk about reproduction, they’ll probably say, “NO!”

Third, when answering children’s questions, always remember that less is better than more. Begin with the simplest explanation and move to a more complicated one if a child continues to be interested or ask questions. You can’t tell your children “too much”—what they don’t understand will just go over their heads.

Fourth, be aware of your body language. When your child asks a difficult question, you may be sending out mixed messages if you wince while you’re exclaiming, “What a great question!”

Fifth, be patient. Expect children to ask the same questions again and again. That’s the way they learn.

Sixth, don’t forget your sense of humor—in fact, use it to your advantage. Tell your children about all of the misconceptions that you had about reproduction when you were their age. They’ll feel much better about themselves!

And finally, ask your children for their opinion. Their self-respect begins with the consideration they receive from others.

Okay, let’s put some of these suggestions

into action. Let's say you're watching TV with your eight-year-old daughter and nine-year-old son. As the program unfolds, the main character, a single woman, reveals that she is pregnant. Her friends are thrilled, and they all decide to celebrate by downing a couple of bottles of champagne. What do you do?

This is a classic "teachable moment," but it's also not the best time to start a conversation because you know it's better to talk with each child in private. This buys you time to think about your response! There are probably a lot of things you want to say about this TV show, and many of the things you say will be based on your values. So, how do you feel about single women who want to raise children on their own? Do you think it's okay for pregnant women to drink? You may not want to consider these questions, but once you start discussing this show with your children, it's hard to see which way the conversation will turn and what will come up.

Okay, you've given some thought to your values and messages, and now it's time to approach each child individually. But what if they weren't even paying attention to the show? Maybe it's best to find out first what they saw and what they already have heard about the topic. So ask them, and let the conversation go from there. Here are some possible conversation starters (your choice of starter may depend on how much each child already knows about the subject):

Hey, remember that TV show we were watching earlier? That woman was pregnant, wasn't she? Do you remember what we said about how a woman gets pregnant?

Hey, remember that TV show we were watching earlier? A lot of children your age think you can't get pregnant if you're not married. Is that right?

Hey, remember that TV show we were watching earlier? Have you heard anything about the effects of alcohol on a fetus?

At this point, you may be hoping that we're going to provide you with the script for the rest of this conversation. Sorry, we just can't do that—not because we don't want to help you, but because we may not have the same values as you and because there's no predicting where your child will take this conversation. Just remember...start with simple answers; it's okay to

be embarrassed and it's okay to acknowledge your embarrassment; you don't need to know the answer to every question—you just need to be willing to look up the answers you don't know; if you're thrown by a question, you have the right to answer it later; you have the right to pass on personal questions; and finally, practice pays off—the more times you talk about these issues, the easier it will become.

And speaking of practice, here are some of the typical questions you may be hearing. Why not take a few minutes now to figure out how you might answer some of these questions? Again, if your child asks one of these questions, don't answer it until you find out what s/he already knows. That may be as simple as asking, "What do you think?" or "What have you heard about that?" Then base your "less is better than more" answer on the messages you want to give.

Typical questions asked by five- to six-year-olds:

Why does that lady's stomach stick out so far? Where did I come from? How did I begin? How are babies made? How long does a baby stay in the mother's stomach? How does it get out? How does it feel like to be born? Does it hurt? Can I watch you and Daddy (or Mommy) making a baby?

Myth:

Sexuality information leads to sexual experimentation.

Typical questions asked by six- to nine-year-olds:

When can a girl have a baby? How does a baby come out? How does the baby get in? How come some babies are girls and some are boys? What are Siamese twins? How do twins happen?

Sometimes, it won't be the questions that throw you, but rather the comments. For example, if your child calls another child a "slut," how should you respond? If your child doesn't know what the word means, you don't need to explain it—you can simply say that it's a word used to put people down, like dummy or jerk, and that we don't use words like that. If your child knows what "slut" means, you could talk instead about how insulting the word is, and why there isn't an equally insulting word for men who have more than one partner.

Feeling psyched (or at least better) about talking with your elementary school-age children about reproduction? Ready to go off and find that "teachable moment?" Before you go, let us leave you with a couple of closing thoughts...

Teach your children that there is more to sexuality than intercourse and reproduction. Tell them about affection, trust, respect, responsibility, and intimacy, and practice the behaviors you would like them to adopt. And remember, giving information is not giving permission—it is ignorance that leads to bad decisions. ☑

Good Reads—Ages 5 to 9:

For Children:

How You Were Born. Joanna Cole. Mulberry Books, NY, 1988

How Babies and Families Are Made. Patricia Schaffer. Tabor Sarah Books, Palo Alto, CA, 1988

For Parents:

Show Me Yours: Understanding Children's Sexuality. Ronald and Juliette Goldman. Penguin Books, Australia, 1988

Ages 9 to 13: Really Talking

by Judy Cyprian

The emotional ups and downs of many puberty-aged children can make living with them a challenge at times. They are grappling with a changing body that may feel awkward, strong feelings that seem to take over at times, and a change in relationships both inside and outside the family. Their questions and concerns about all that is happening to them, however, give you many opportunities to talk about changing and growing up.

One of the questions children have at this age is about reproduction. Children want to know how babies are made, even if they act as if they have no interest in talking about it. You may have answered the question, “Where did I come from?” when your child was younger, but his curiosity about this questions doesn’t end with the answer you gave him back then. As children growing up, they approach the same question from a different vantage point. Young children want to know about how they got here, and the question is appropriately self-centered. Now they want to understand reproduction from more of a factual point of view. The simpler answers they may have received earlier do not satisfy them now, especially when their bodies are going through so many changes that have to do with becoming a physically mature adult.

The physical changes of puberty leave many children feeling embarrassed, confused, and wondering if they are “normal.” Explaining to a child the reasons for those changes helps her to normalize them and to feel more in control. So as you talk with your child about such things as tampons, pads, and wet dreams, don’t forget to address the underlying reason for body changes. After all, the main point for all of the physical changes of puberty is reproduction.

Children this age are ready for and need to know the details. They need to know about the reproductive body parts for both genders and how they work. Just hearing about their own gender gives them only half the picture and will not be useful in the long run. Both boys and girls need to

understand such things as erections, ejaculation, the menstrual cycle, and intercourse.

This is a lot to comprehend! There are lots of details and abstract concepts that children may find confusing. So, if you are explaining this to

Myth:

Children do not perceive their parents as important sources of sexuality information and values.

your child, expect to go over it a few times before he clearly understands it. You may want to ask what he has already heard before you begin. That way, you know where to start and where he may need clarification. Being confused about reproduction is like being confused about any other concept—it will not result in any harm to your child. Once he has gotten the message that you will talk with him, he knows that he can go back to you to straighten things out when he is ready. Once they do understand, children often want to know more. They have questions about things such as twins and Siamese twins, and whether it’s true that there have been men who have given birth. Children this age are full of questions, and if they find someone who is willing to talk with them, they may feel free to ask them.

Talking about reproduction now will help your child make decisions about her sexual involvement in future relationships. Children who do not have any information are more easily manipulated into doing things they may not have done had they had all the facts. Young people who have the facts won’t believe it if their future partners tell them that “you can’t get pregnant the first time,” or “you can’t get pregnant standing up.” Because most children this age are not having sex, they are more open to discussing what can happen when someone does have sex. This is the age when they can listen and question. This is a great age to talk about reproduction.

When you talk with your child about sexuality, you are giving him more than information. You are giving him the message that you will talk with him about sexual matters, and that helps him feel secure and valued. Knowing that you will talk with him allows him to rely on you when he is older and possibly involved in a sexual relationship.

Although talking with your child about sexuality is an important thing to do, it is not necessarily easy. She may want to hear what you have to say, but may act as if she doesn’t care or that she already knows all about it. You can’t make your child talk. What you can do is give her the opportunity to talk with you; it is up to her to decide if she’ll take it.

Getting started may be the hardest part. Choose the right time and place to talk. Most children agree that they prefer to talk about this in private. They do not want their siblings around when you are talking with them about private, personal, and (usually) embarrassing topics like body changes and reproduction. Some children and parents do well when they are in the car together, while others feel trapped there. In some families, personal conversation feels best while sitting on a couch, while in other families, the conversation happens when they are in the kitchen making dinner. You probably know where your child feels the most comfortable—use that place to have these types of conversations.

Though many parents are clear that moms should talk with the daughter, they may wonder which parent should talk with the son. Most children say they would prefer to talk with a parent of the same gender, but that is not always possible. What counts is that someone talks with each child.

Many schools have a unit about puberty in the upper elementary or middle school grades. Find out what is being taught in your child’s school and talk with your child about it. If you ask him what they talked about in class, you will probably get, “nothing.” But if you ask him if kids giggled in class and what made them so

giggly, or if you ask his opinion about having the boys and girls together or apart for their discussions, you may get the conversation to go a bit further.

Some children like when you talk about what puberty was like for you when you were their age. They like hearing some of your own embarrassing moments around puberty, some of the jokes you didn't get, or how you learned about sex. It helps them feel less embarrassed knowing that you were embarrassed too, and it also lets them know that you had questions similar to their questions. This may encourage them to talk with you more about their questions and concerns. Remember that talking about yourself may lead to questions about your personal behavior. You certainly have a right to privacy and may choose not to answer such personal questions. You may, however, be able to talk about what you learned from your experiences without revealing the details. That way you get to talk at a level that feels comfortable, and your child still gets to hear and discuss what you learned from your own experiences. Before you start talking about yourself, keep one thing in mind—your child may not find your past as interesting or relevant as you think it is. If your child rolls her eyes and groans when you begin talking about your first period, take the hint and switch your approach.

Talking about reproduction is not just talking about body parts. There are a lot of messages parents can give their children about sex, responsibilities and risks, and about the different ways of showing affection. Although some children may be willing to engage in a conversation with their parents and offer their own opinions, others may feel put on the spot and uncomfortable. Talking around but not directly to your child may help. Talk to the TV in front of your child: "I wish that couple had known each other a little better before they went off into the bedroom," or "Isn't there more to their relationship than sex? That seems awfully shallow." You can also have your puberty-aged child "overhear" adult conversations. If there is another adult in the household or an older

child, talk with that person about your beliefs and attitudes regarding sexuality within earshot of the intended audience. There are plenty of stories in the news about pregnancy and sex that you can talk about (and thereby let your child know how you think and feel about such matters) without having him feel pressured to join in. You are giving him important information, but because it isn't directly aimed at him, he may be better able to hear what is being said and may even choose to join in the conversation.

Books are a great way to begin a conversation about puberty and reproduction.


You may want to read the book together, or read it separately and then talk about what you learned or what you found interesting, funny, or embarrassing. Sometimes buying a book and leaving it in a child's room or on the coffee table and never discussing it at all works well in families where it is hard for parents and children to talk. Your child will get the information she needs, as well as the message that you are willing to address sexuality with her when she is ready.

Once parents begin to feel more comfortable talking with their child, they may worry about when to stop. "How do I know when I've said too much or gone too far?" is a common question. The answer lies with your child; look to him for cues. Fidgeting, changing the subject, or leaving the room are all clear indicators that he is done talking for now. He will come back for more when he is ready.

Families that can't talk about sexuality sometimes find that writing to each other works. There may be a special notebook that the parent shares with the child and leaves in a special place. The parent may

put news clippings in it with a comment or a question, or the parent may refer to a book they were both reading and write, "I thought the part about menstruation was confusing...did you?" Questions can also be answered writing. This approach respects a child who doesn't want to talk with her parent, yet still gives her the guidance, information, and support she needs.

No matter how you address sexuality with your child, remember to respect his privacy. Children want their parents to keep their confidences and personal conversations private. They do not like it when parents tell their friends about these conversations and often stop talking when they find out this has happened.

Talking about reproduction with children can feel awkward and embarrassing, and you may not always do it as well as you would have liked. The good news is that you will have your children with you for many more years to come and have many more opportunities to talk with them. The more often you do it, the easier it will become for both of you. Every time you talk with your child, even when the conversation does not go well, you are letting her know that you care about her and her growing up. There are few things more important than that! 

Myth:
Information about sexuality is harmful to children.

Good Reads—Ages 9 to 13:

For Children:

It's Perfectly Normal. Robie Harris. Candlewick Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994

What's Happening to Me? Peter Mayle. Carol Publishing Group, Secaucus, NJ, 1975

For Parents:

Raising A Child Conservatively in a Sexually Permissive World. Sol and Judith Gordon. Fireside Books, NY, 1989

Ages 13 to 18: Beyond Reproduction

by Anne Johnson

During the teen years, discussion about sexuality needs to go further than, “Where did I come from?” Teens are learning about intimacy through dating relationships, and they are making difficult decisions about these relationships. Because teens often live in the moment, they may not be able to consistently see the long-term effects of their choices and behaviors, and yet they are making decisions that may affect them the rest of their lives. Their decisions about sex may be based on a search for love and identity, peer associations, whether or not they use drugs, their relationship with their parents, and their academic performance.

Although teen males are more affected by discussion with peers, and females are more influenced by discussion with parents, peer association may be the strongest predictor of adolescent behavior. A teen who resists engaging in sexual activity tends to have friends who are abstinent as well. She also tends to have strong personal beliefs in abstinence and the perception of negative parental reactions to sexual

behavior. Teens who are sexually active tend to believe that most of their friends are sexually active as well, that the rewards of sexual involvement outweigh the costs, that sex is rewarding, and that it is alright for unmarried adolescents over the age of 16 to engage in intercourse.*

So how can you cultivate a relationship with your teen that will enhance healthy sexual decision-making? First, parents must recognize that young people have maturing bodies and sexual feelings. The pressures they face are very complex and confusing, and become even moreso when adults don't acknowledge that sexual feelings are normal. Although many parents wish they could ignore the fact that teens will, at some point, think about sexual intercourse, it is important and critical to talk about the issue. It can be difficult for both of you. Even though your relationship with your child may be strong, your teen may resist talking about such a personal and pressing issue, and you may also be reluctant due to lack of information, embarrassment, or the fear of putting ideas into your

teenager's head. No matter what a parent's values are about sexuality, forbiddance without explanation rarely works. Parents need to think about the messages they are giving to their teens. Instead of the message being “DON'T,” the message should be “KNOWLEDGE, RESPONSIBILITY, AND SAFETY.”

Teens are ready for detailed information about reproduction, birth control, and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS. Teens need to know that there are consequences associated with choosing to be sexually active, and they need to know what their parents' values are around sexual involvement. You can share a news article, look at books with your teen, or use a situation on TV to open up the discussion and ask your teen what she thinks. This is an opportunity to provide accurate information, dispel myths, and discuss values in a non-threatening way. Even if she seems uninterested in discussing these issues, bring up the topic at the dinner table with another adult. She will not feel pressured to participate, but she will still receive information and opinions that might help her make decisions. Another great place to start a conversation is in the car. Since someone will be driving, it may be easier for teens to talk here because there won't be direct eye contact, which may cause discomfort. Just be aware that some teens don't like this approach because they feel trapped in a car.

Your teen may initiate a conversation with you by asking a question starting with, “I have a friend....” Instead of trying to figure out whether there really is a friend, you need to keep the lines of communication open. Offer accurate information, discuss the “friend's” responsibility or lack of it, and also talk about your values. When discussing sexuality, avoid questions that could be threatening or assuming, such as, “Why did you do that?” or “Why do you want

Did you know that:

- ☞ Adolescents and children often cite their parents as their preferred source of education about sex.
- ☞ The most commonly discussed topics between parents and children are HIV and STDs. Two of the least common topics discussed are physical and sexual development.
- ☞ Open discussion of sexual topics has been shown to inhibit early initiation of sexual activity.
- ☞ Open discussion of sexual topics has been shown to reduce sexual risk-taking behavior.
- ☞ Fathers and sons discuss sexuality as often as mothers and sons do.
- ☞ Although ¾ of all teens say they have discussed sexual issues with their parents, the majority of teens would like the freedom to have further discussions about sexuality with their parents.


—National Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health, 1995

to know?” When teens ask questions about sexuality, it might be their way of negotiating through this confusing time, not an indication that they are sexually active. Asking questions that begin with “how” or “what” will generate more of a discussion and give each of you a chance to voice your own opinions. You can model good communication skills by listening carefully, being open to questions and concerns, and trying to understand your teen’s point of view. Teens will engage in discussions more often if they know they are being listened to and not judged. Teens may not be willing to share their feelings if an adult’s response is seeped in judgement. Remember that teens still want and need their parents’ approval, even though they might never realize or admit that. Creating a conversation that is an exchange—one that helps you understand your teen’s perspective—will lead to your teen’s understanding of your view.

Not all parents, however, are equipped with the knowledge necessary to talk with their teen about sexuality. More often than not, their own parents never spoke with them about these issues. It’s okay not to know everything and to feel uncomfortable. You just need to be willing to find out the answers from other resources, including your own friends and professionals. Whether or not you know the facts, it is very important at this point for you to share your own values and feelings about sexuality with your teen. Talking about values and feelings will give your teen an idea about what is important to you, and will help him get a jumpstart on assessing his own values before peer influence sets in. Even if he doesn’t agree with all of your values, he is more likely to use protection and make other decisions in his own best interest if he has received clear messages from the adults in his life. Many teens have never talked to a parent about any issue related to sexuality and regret having

engaged in behaviors that they might not have if they talked with their parents beforehand.

Teens are going to get information about sexuality from many places—the school bus, the athletic field, or from the neighborhood “sexuality expert.” Teens also want information from their parents, and parents can rise to the occasion by providing not just information but also by discussing family values. The more a teen hears her parents talk about sexuality issues, the more comfortable she’ll feel going to her parents with her questions. Sexuality is natural and encompasses far more than the act of intercourse. Talking with teens about all aspects of sexuality will make it easier for parents to talk with teens about healthy choices around sexuality activity. Teens need to have complete

and accurate information—then they’ll have what they need to make healthy choices. 

* Advocates for Youth. *The Facts: Adolescent Sexual Behavior II: Socio-Psychological Factors*. September, 1997.

Good Reads—Ages 13 to 18:

For Children:
















Changing Bodies, Changing Lives. Ruth Bell. Random House, Westminster, MD, 1988

The Underground Guide to Teenage Sexuality. Michael J. Basso. Fairview Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1977

For Parents:

Getting Your Kids to Say ‘No’ in the ‘90s When You Said ‘Yes’ in the ‘60s. Victor Strasburger. Fireside Books, NY, 1993

Tips for parents that encourage sexual health in teens:

-  Demonstrate value, respect, acceptance, and trust in your adolescent children
-  Model sexually healthy attitudes in your own relationships
-  Maintain nonpunitive stance toward sexuality
-  Be knowledgeable about sexuality
-  Discuss sexuality with your children
-  Provide information on sexuality to your children
-  Seek appropriate guidance and information as needed
-  Try to understand your adolescent’s point of view
-  Help adolescents gain understanding of values
-  Set and maintain limits for dating and other activities outside of school
-  Stay actively involved in your young person’s life
-  Ask questions about friends and romantic partners
-  Provide a supportive and safe environment for your children
-  Offer to assist adolescents in getting health care services
-  Help them plan for their future.

—National Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health, 1995

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but also gives them a feeling that you care about and respect them.

Eventually your child will want some more information. “What do you mean that I came from mom and dad?” Or, “How did I get inside your body?” Then it is the time to take the answer a little further while still keeping it simple. You can talk about penises in vaginas, sperm and ova, and the love and cuddling and good touching that accompanies making babies. Children will create images that go with the words they hear, and the words you use will affect the images they create. If a parent tells his child that she grew inside her mother’s tummy, the child may imagine being mixed in with pieces of pizza or peanut butter sandwiches. If a child hears that he began from a seed, he may think he was planted in the ground. If told that she came from an egg, the child may imagine being hatched like a chicken. Talk about the uterus and not the tummy. Explain it as a special part inside a woman’s body where babies grow. Use the word ovum instead of egg and sperm instead of seed. That way, children will get a more accurate picture.

Even after you have answered in a clear and simple manner, your child may not totally understand what you have said. After all, it is not very concrete—it’s not something they can hold in their hands or see. Nevertheless, the fact that they may not grasp your explanation won’t lead to any harmful results. What they don’t understand will go right over their heads. In fact, they may need to hear your answer over and over again as their abilities to understand grow. So expect to repeat. It will get easier each time you do it.

Answering this question can feel like a very hard thing to do, especially if you don’t remember anyone answering it

for you. Try, however, to do so in a relaxed kind of way. Tone is often more important than the words used. Delivering a lecture in a stern voice will sound very different than having a conversation in a calm, loving manner. Be prepared—think about what you would want to say, and practice when your child isn’t around. It won’t go to waste, because sooner or later, your child will want to know the answer to this question. Remember, when children ask about this, they are not asking about sex. They are asking about themselves.


Support your child for asking this question. You may want to begin your answer with, “I am so glad you asked me that,” or “What a good question. Let me think about how I want to answer that.” Praising your child in this way can only add to her feelings of self-worth and encourage her to continue to come to you with her questions.

Many children do not ask this question now. Some children are not curious about this until they are older. If your child doesn’t ask, you can decide whether you want to bring it up. If you decide to do so, take advantage of opportunities that allow for you to address the topic. Children this age often have others in their lives who are pregnant. If a friend or family member is expecting a baby, use that to begin a conversation with your own child. “Have you noticed anything different about Aunt Mary lately? What do you think is happening?” Then relate it to them and where they came from. Look to your child for cues. He may not be interested even after you have brought it up. If so, respect his interests and drop the conversation. If nothing else, he has still received something very important from you—he has learned that you will talk with him about this when he is ready.

That little message can increase your child’s feelings of safety, security, and love.

There are many books written for the very young about reproduction. Reading one of these books with your child is another way to introduce the topic or to explain it to him if he has questions. Please see the ‘good reads’ section of this newsletter for suggestions.

Many children love to hear the story of their own birth or of their adoption. In fact, you probably know that some children love to hear it over and over again! Telling your child that story and letting her know how glad you are that you have her lets her know how special and unique she is and how much she means to you. It may also lead to her questions about how she came to be in the first place.

No one is perfect, and you may not or respond to your child in the best way, but... who does? Remember that you have a lifetime of opportunities with your child and many chances to do it differently or better the next time. No matter how much you fumble, say the wrong words, or hem and haw, your child is understanding some things very clearly: you care about him, and you will talk with him about sexuality when he is ready to do so. You are setting an important foundation for communication between the two of you that can last a lifetime. 

Good Reads—Ages 0 to 5:

For Children:

Bellybuttons Are Navels. Mark Schoen. Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1990

Baby Brendon’s Busy Day: A Sexuality Primer. *Baby Brenda’s Busy Day: A Sexuality Primer.* Donna Jennings. Goose Pond Publishing, Tallahassee, FL, 1993

For Parents:

When Sex Is the Subject. Pamela Wilson, ETR Associates, Santa Cruz, CA, 1991

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