

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 3 - No. 1

Sex Education??? My Child's Only 3 Years Old!

...well then, already s/he has received a wealth of messages about sexuality - three years worth, in fact. Just think about it:

- when infants are touched and cuddled, they learn that they are lovable.
- Choices of clothing (pink vs. blue), toys (dolls vs. trucks), play-time activities (tea party vs. baseball) all present messages about male/female roles and expectations.
- Seeing a brother, sister, or parent in the shower teaches about physical differences between males and females.
- A parent's willingness (or lack of) to respond openly and honestly to the question, "How did the baby come out?" conveys an attitude about the subject of sex.

The fact is, you have been educating your child about sex all along - through your words as well as through your silence; in your verbal and non-verbal communication. Your responses and reactions have taught your child a great deal about sexuality - not only in terms of information, but also in terms of your values and attitudes.

You cannot avoid being your child's primary and most important sex educator... nor would you want to. As a parent, you exert a most powerful influence over your child's sexual attitudes and development. The family experiences you shape, from the moment your child is born, help determine the extent to which s/he develops positive, healthy feelings about sexuality.

Yet the thought that sex education begins at birth is, for many, a novel idea. The unsuspecting parent may allow several formative years to pass before the realization sets in: **children - even very young children - deserve thoughtful, purposeful sexuality education.** As parents more consciously attend to that education, they prepare their children to face the challenges - and sexual choices that lie ahead.

OK - When My Child Asks, Then We'll Talk

...but will you recognize the asking? Children are interested in sexuality long before they can verbalize the questions. For example, a pre-schooler may want to watch daddy in the shower or touch mommy's pregnant belly. These present ideal "teachable moments" to pass along lessons on anatomy, reproduction and birth.

When parents take advantage of such opportunities, they not only provide important factual information, they also affirm their willingness to discuss sexual issues with their children. This helps establish an atmosphere of comfort and trust which encourages children to seek additional sexual information from parents in the future.

You needn't worry about telling your child "too much too soon." S/he will simply absorb what s/he can and show boredom with the rest (you know the signs: glazed eyes, yawning, leaving the room...). Your comments are not wasted. S/he may not have gotten all the detail, but clearly the message is "**mom and dad are 'askable'.**"

Danger lies not in "too much too soon," but in "too little too late." When parents recognize the asking and respond openly and lovingly, they are well on the way to providing quality family sex education.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 3 - No. 2

Of Storks and Cabbage Patches

A 3-year-old's view of the world is a very literal one. For example, when told that a baby is growing in mommy's tummy, a child may ask, "Why did she eat the baby?" The vision is one of a baby mixed with food in mommy's stomach. Anything other than truthful, simple answers only creates confusion.

Beyond confusion, a sense of mistrust may develop when a child, told by her parents that the stork brought her, later discovers the truth. Through all this, the message implied is that sex is negative - and not an ok subject to talk about openly, honestly.

Concocting fables in response to children's sexual questions is a disservice to them. Their questions deserve truthful answers - scaled to their level of understanding, of course.

For example, when a young child asks, "Where did I come from?", a parent may at first say, "What a fine question! Do you have any ideas about that?" This accomplishes three things: it clarifies what the child is really asking (S/he may simply mean "what city," in which case you're off the hook); it buys the parent some time to collect his/her thoughts;

and it provides a sense of how much the child already knows.

The second response can be something simple, and honest: "You started as a tiny egg inside mommy's body." This alone may well satisfy the child (although probably not), yet it leaves the door open for further discussion.

The point is, honesty really is the best policy. There's certainly no need at this stage to deliver a lengthy description of intercourse, conception and birth. That's not what your 3-year-old is interested in now. S/he just wants some basic information.

So relax. For the young child, sex doesn't have the same emotional significance as it does for an adult. Keeping this in mind can be a great help to parents as they encounter their children's normal sexual curiosities.

Is Your Sexism Showing?

During the pre-school years, parents have perhaps the greatest opportunity to influence their children's sexual attitudes - including ones about sex role expectations. It's a wonderful time to plant the seed that both boys and girls are capable of just about anything they wish.

When parents are careful to avoid stereotyping male/female roles, children learn that life options need not be limited by their gender. This does wonders for their self-esteem.

Take advantage of the many simple opportunities to broaden your child's perspective with regard to sex role expectations:

- **Share** household chores.
- **Allow and encourage** children to play with toys and take part in games that cross traditional lines - it's fine for boys to play with dolls and girls to play football.
- **Read non-sexist literature** to your child - with males and females portrayed in a variety of roles.
- **Pay attention to language** implying sex role limitations (ie. "fireman" vs. "firefighter"). Use "he or she" in reference to doctors, nurses, etc. It's awkward, but makes an important point.

Simplistic? Pointless? Don't let the subtlety fool you. When parents refuse to pigeonhole male/female expectations, they allow a child's "self" to blossom.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 3 - No. 3

An Ear Is An Ear ...

... and a penis is a penis, not a "wee-wee;" a vagina is a vagina, not a "down there." When parents use incorrect names for sexual body parts, the message is that they are somehow different or that there is something wrong or unmentionable about them. Often this results in children learning to be embarrassed or ashamed of their genitals.

Studies have shown the value of teaching children the proper names for sexual body parts. Aside from promoting a positive sexual attitude, accurate terminology can at times become especially important. For example, if a child is trying to describe an injury or inappropriate sexual touch, s/he needs to be equipped with language more precise than "down there."

Frequently a child may refer to sexual body parts using terms s/he's heard from friends. It's perfectly fine to say something like, "Some people call it a "wee wee," but that's just a made-up word. The real name is "penis" and that's the word we like you to use."

Such a simple, matter of fact response may seem somewhat trivial to us. To a child however, it's an important lesson - one which

encourages respect and a healthy attitude toward his body and sexuality in general.

What's That???

At age 3, a child is intensely curious about bodies - and not just her own. There's particular fascination with sex differences and body functions. This interest may be demonstrated in a variety of ways: "playing doctor," wanting to watch mom/dad in the bathroom, genital play, comparing body parts to other gender friends or siblings.

About this time, a girl begins to wonder what happened to *her* penis, and a boy wants to know "what those are" (pointing to mommy's breasts). Opportunities abound for sharing information on sexuality, growth and development.

- Q. What happened to *my* penis?
- A. You never had one. Only a boy has a penis. A girl has a clitoris.
- Q. Can I see where the baby came out of you?
- A. The baby came out through an opening between my legs called the vagina. I prefer not to show you my vagina because it's a private part of my body. Would you like to look at a book on how babies are born?

•Q. Why does Paul stand up to pee, and I have to sit?

•A. It's easier for girls urinate sitting down. Their "pee" - the real name is urine - comes out through a small opening near the vagina. A boy urinates from his penis.

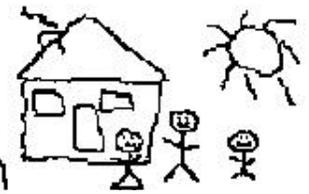
•Q. Can I have a baby when I get big?

•A. Only a woman can have a baby, Johnny. She has a special place in her body called the uterus where the baby grows. Daddies help to make a baby. You can be a daddy when you grow up if you want to.

These are just some ideas on how a parent might respond. You will decide for yourself how you wish to handle your child's questions.

The point is, children are seeking basic information at this stage, and deserve simple, *honest* answers. The important thing is for parents to respond in a supportive manner. It's a nice time to get a little practice. Take advantage of the easy questions now... it will help you respond to the hard ones later.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 3 - No. 4

Show Me Yours and I'll Show You Mine...

Hmmm. Your 3-year-old Jenny and her little friend Will are playing quietly upstairs - *too* quietly. What are those kids up to?

Uh-oh. Jenny's door is closed. Resisting the urge to waltz right in (you've been teaching her about privacy these days - respecting closed doors and all that), you knock. Giggling bubbles up from within Jenny's room, and you think you hear a faint "come in"... so you do.

There stand Jenny and Will thoroughly enjoying that classic pre-school pastime, "playing doctor." They have shed their clothes and are busily examining each other. **Now what do you do?!**

You could respond with shock and anger: "What are you two doing? Put your clothes on *right now*, and don't ever let me catch you at that again! Will, I'm taking you home!" **Message:** The children are bad; curiosity about bodies is wrong; nudity is wrong. This of course leaves the children feeling confused, ashamed and hurt. After all, they were just displaying a normal 3-year-old interest in bodies.

Perhaps you remain unruffled and acknowledge the children's curi-

osity: "It looks like you two are interested in how boys' and girls' bodies are different. While you put your clothes on, I'll get a picture book we can look at that explains all about bodies." **Message:** It's ok to be curious about bodies; I prefer you keep your clothes on; I'm willing to help you learn.

There are a number of ways a parent might react to this type of situation. When choosing your response, remember to see the behavior from a child's eye view. Pre-school children are fascinated with bodies. Their desire to check out the differences between "yours and mine" is a natural part of their developing sense of self and sexual identification.

Since "playing doctor" is universally popular among young children, it's likely you'll be dealing with it in your own family. Plan your response ahead of time, keeping in mind the messages you wish to express. In this way, rather than reacting in a knee-jerk, perhaps negative manner, you can offer a thoughtful, positive response.

A final thought ... no matter how you deal with this situation, it's important to discuss it with the other child's parents. They may or may not agree with how you handled things, but will appreciate

being informed. It gives them a chance to convey their own family values and beliefs to their child.

HELP!!!

Relax. There's a lot of help out there... in the form of books, films, classes, and resource people. Community schools and colleges may offer parenting classes which include sexuality education. Planned Parenthood is an excellent source of speakers, books and pamphlets. Your local health department, private physicians, family counselors and members of the clergy often have valuable insights into family-based sexuality education.

For 3-year-olds and their parents, several good books are available. Preview them before using with your child:

Did the Sun Shine Before You Were Born? Sol & Judith Gordon

Bellybuttons are Navels
Mark Schoen

Talking With Your Child About Sex

Dr. Mary S. Calderone and Dr. James W. Ramey

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Age 3 - No. 5

There's a Time and Place ... Or Is There?

Pre-school children fondle their genitals for many reasons. They may be sleepy or bored, nervous or upset... and it's comforting; they may be in circle time listening to a story, or engrossed in a TV show. Pre-school children also fondle their genitals because it feels good. If parents find this hard to acknowledge, perhaps it's in the challenge of accepting that children are sexual beings.

Masturbation is a normal part of development. Most experts agree that this can be a healthy expression of sexuality, regardless of age. However, some people disapprove of masturbation for religious or other reasons.

The way in which parents react to their child's genital play is important. Punishing, scolding, or pulling the child's hand away sends a message that the genitals are bad or dirty. It can foster guilt, shame and embarrassment.

Parents who disapprove of masturbation could explain to their child - calmly and lovingly - that they believe this behavior isn't acceptable. Simply telling the child, "STOP THAT!" is rarely effective; neither is trying to distract them with another activity.

Many parents do not object to their child's genital play, yet feel compelled (and rightfully so) to discourage its occurrence say, in the middle of the grocery store. It's perfectly fine to say something like: "Sara, I know it feels good when you touch your genitals. And it's something you do in private - not where other people can see you." This sends out a message about appropriate behavior and respect for others. At the same time, sexuality is kept in a positive light.

Parents who accept masturbation may worry that their child is "doing it too much." Children will stop when they are satisfied, or if they become physically uncomfortable. Compulsive masturbation - compulsive *anything* - may indicate a problem. If a parent notices his child is masturbating to the point where it interferes with other normal activities, it is time to consult a physician or other professional.

The "Askable" Parent

Attending to your child's sex education may be an awesome task. The reality is, you are the ideal person for the job. After all, you can best convey the family values and beliefs surrounding this issue. Keep in mind a few tips to smooth the journey:

- Parents: talk with one another** about the messages you want to give to your child about sex.

- Anticipate** sexual questions and behaviors. Plan and practice your responses.

- Answer questions as they arise.** Replies such as, "Not now" and "You don't need to know that," teach children it's not ok to ask. You can delay a discussion with "This isn't a good time now. Let's talk after dinner." Then follow through!

- Tell your child** if you're embarrassed. A comment like "This is hard for me to talk about, but I'm willing to try" is wonderful! S/he will appreciate your honesty.

- Answer simply and honestly**, leaving the door open for further discussion.

- Initiate discussion** about sex. Ask, "Have you ever wondered about how you were born?"; use picture books; visit a pregnant friend.

- Use everyday events** as "teachable moments" for passing along family messages about sexuality.

Your child's initiation into the lifetime process of sexual learning can be wonderful or difficult.

You get to choose.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 4 - No. 1

Sex Is No Secret To A Four Year Old

Just how much sexuality education has your child had by age 4? Plenty. And where has most of it come from? Probably you... hopefully in thoughtful, purposeful and loving ways.

Parents are teaching about sexuality every day...from the moment their child is born. Showing love and affection to children - touching, hugging, cuddling...these are all ways of giving positive messages about sexuality. How parents respond (or not) to a child's natural curiosity about sexual differences, body parts, where babies come from, etc. certainly these present loud and clear messages about sexuality.

Beyond the homefront, children also receive plenty of sex education - some of it negative, or at least questionable. Media messages about sex bombard the senses...from billboards to TV, magazines and music.

You may think your 4-year-old is oblivious to these messages. S/he isn't. So why not use them as opportunities to share your own values and attitudes around sexuality? At age four, your child may not fully understand your message, but one thing will be clear: mom and dad think it's important

to talk about sex openly and honestly.

Even at pre-school, children share lots of (mis)information about sex with each other. Some of their ideas can be pretty wild... and they may not check them out with you.

Considering all this "sex education" that goes on with or without parent consent, you'd be wise to get your two cents worth in too!

Wait a Minute. Haven't We Discussed This?

Don't be surprised if your 4-year-old's sexual questions are the very ones you thought were taken care of when s/he was three. Throughout your child's early years, you will be called upon to repeat the same "sexplanations" again and again... and yet again.

A 4-year-old learns by asking questions - LOTS of them! As you respond to sexual questions patiently, openly, and honestly, you let your children know, "You're important to me. I am willing to take time with you," and "I'm glad you asked me. This is a good topic for us to talk about."

Your child's sexual curiosity may surface at the most inopportune

times: during dinner at grandma's, on a crowded elevator, in line at the checkout stand. If you're unwilling to discuss it at that moment, let your child know it's the *timing* that's bad, not the *question*. "I'm glad you asked me, Michael. We'll have time to talk about it on the way home." This is far more supportive and positive than a stern "Hush, Michael!" or worse yet, silence.

So your child's questions cause a bit of embarrassment, or the timing's awkward. Be happy s/he feels comfortable asking you.

When young children don't ask mom and dad about sex, it isn't that they're not curious. Typically they've learned it isn't ok to ask, or that the subject causes discomfort. Having such feelings reinforced as they grow up, children often turn elsewhere to satisfy their sexual curiosity... to friends, the media, personal experimentation. The unfortunate result is misinformed, vulnerable youth.

Clearly, parents want to provide (and children want to receive) information and guidance in the area of sexuality.

You can make that happen!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 4 - No. 2

A Question of Birthday Suits

“At what point do I insist that my child - or my partner - wear clothes around the house?” Parents often wonder what impact nudity in the family has on children.

While their children are young, many parents have a relaxed attitude about nudity. Beyond the toddler stage however, especially with children of the other gender, parents may begin to question its appropriateness.

Parents should examine their comfort level around being undressed in front of their children. Comfort suggests a feeling of “ok-ness” or self-acceptance about the body. This is a healthy attitude for children to learn. During pre-school years, nudity among family members in natural situations (taking a shower, getting undressed) pro-vides opportunities for children to find out about body parts and sexual differences...between males and females, kids and grown-ups.

If parents are uncomfortable being undressed around their children, they can certainly use another method, such as picture books to teach about bodies. It's important to talk with children about when and where nudity may be appropriate (ie. at home,

with family members vs. in public places). A natural follow-up could be a discussion about respecting privacy:

Q. Mommy, why can't I take showers with you anymore? Steven showers with his mom.

A. That's something each family decides on, David, depending on what they feel ok about. I like having my privacy now when I shower.

This is reinforced when parents in turn respect their children's right to privacy. Knocking on a closed door, allowing private use of the bathroom - these let your child know you honor his/her wish for privacy.

Often the whole question of nudity in the home takes care of itself when the young child (perhaps as early as age 4) begins to act a bit more modestly. S/he may be less inclined to be seen undressed in front of others, and may even prefer that parents remain clothed. Families should respect those feelings.

Realize too, that many children may be quite comfortable with nudity in the family, even through their elementary school years.

Speaking of Privacy ...

You forgot to remind Ricky not to enter your bedroom without

knocking; or maybe he's concerned about the noises, and thinks mommy and daddy are fighting. Whatever the reason, there he stands. You're caught in “the act!”

While it's the ultimate challenge for parents to remain cool under such circumstances, it's important that they do so. Yelling (“What are you doing here? Get back to your room!”) or scolding (“How dare you come into our room without knocking!”) causes Ricky to feel hurt and shame. Add this to the confusion he's experiencing, and you have a very upset, frightened child.

Through a child's eyes and ears, intercourse can seem like “daddy is hurting mommy.” If caught in the act, parents need to be calm and reassuring. “Daddy and I are playing together and loving each other. This is our private time, so please go back to your room.” Later, parents can follow up, repeating that mom and dad were playing, not fighting. It's also a chance to reinforce respect for privacy: “Remember, when our door is closed, please knock and wait for us to say 'come in'.”

Handled with understanding and love, this can be yet another “teachable moment” (although a challenging one) for providing valuable lessons about sex.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 4 - No. 3

What Did You Say!?

Dad says (or rather, hollers): "Mary! Don't ever let me hear you say that word again!" He wants Mary to learn that "dirty" language is unacceptable.

Mary thinks: "Ok. I'll only say it when you're not around." She realizes that certain words make daddy holler. She's not sure why. She doesn't know what the words mean... or why they're not ok. What's really confusing is, why doesn't daddy holler at mommy or his friends when they use those words? And why does he say them?

Now... how successful do you think dad has been in getting his message across to Mary?

Typically, parents are upset when their children repeat "dirty" words they've heard at pre-school (or at home, for that matter). In deciding how to respond, it's helpful to understand the reasons a child may be using those words:

•S/he wants attention:

In this case, the parent may choose to ignore the initial use of such language.

•S/he wants information: A young child often uses inappropriate language without knowing what it means. S/he may

sense the word is shocking or provocative, and want confirmation. A parent might ask, "Mary, what does that word mean?" then offer the correct definition. "Is that what you want to say?" This response neutralizes the word, provides information, and demonstrates the parent's willingness to talk about sexual issues/terminology, etc.

•S/he is angry/frustrated: It's important that parents acknowledge those feelings, and help the child choose alternative words to express them. "You sound angry. That's ok, but I don't like the words you're using. Can you think of different words to show your anger?"

Certain parent responses can be counterproductive, resulting in a child's continued use of offensive language: laughing implies the behavior is cute or funny; strong reaction and severe punishment may lead a child to become angry or resentful; ignoring the behavior for an extended period of time implies that it's acceptable.

Finally parents need to remember to monitor their own language. Since young ones love to imitate mom and dad, it's unrealistic to expect they'll parrot only "correct" behavior.

Somebody's Sleeping in My Bed

Even at four years of age, many children love to climb into bed and snuggle with their parents. It's safe, warm, cozy... all those things that feel good to a little one.

Some parents worry about allowing their children into bed with them. **While many experts suggest that children not routinely sleep with their parents, there's certainly no harm in a morning family cuddle in bed.** It can be a great time to talk, read a book, tell stories... all harmless, good fun.

If your 4-year-old is wanting to sleep with you, try to find out why. Maybe she's afraid of the dark, and dislikes being alone in her room; maybe he's feeling the need for more attention or physical closeness to you.

Once you've identified the underlying reason behind your child's request, you can then attend to the real issue. Satisfying the basic needs of the child (security, love, etc.) will often resolve his/her desire to sleep with mom and dad.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 4 - No. 4

Protecting Children From Sexual Abuse

It's a heck of a reason to talk to the kids about sexual issues - and it's a compelling one. Sexual abuse: a subject we shudder to even think about, much less talk about.

One of the most concealed, and most disturbing crimes against children, sexual abuse occurs far more frequently than we'd like to believe. An estimated 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 10 boys, or more, are sexually abused during childhood. Ten percent of all victims are less than six years of age.

Over 70% of these cases involve a person known by the child, such as a step-parent or babysitter; almost half of the abusers, the overwhelming majority of whom are male, are family members.

One of the best approaches to protecting children against sexual abuse is to help them protect themselves. To do this, they need awareness, knowledge and skills:

- Explain** the difference between good and bad touching. Tell your child that good touch feels comforting, pleasant and welcome... (examples might be hugging or cuddling - as long as it is appropriate and with permission); bad

touch hurts physically or is uncomfortable (being pinched; having someone touch your penis/vulva when you don't want them to; a hug that is too tight - or forced upon you).

- Impress** on your child that "Your body is your own, and you have the right to say 'no' if anyone touches you in a way you don't like."

- Allow** your child to decide whether s/he wants to give or receive hugs and kisses. Insisting that Jimmy kiss grandpa is unfair. Offer affection to your youngster rather than impose it. Substitute "Can I have (or give you) a hug?" for "Give me a hug." This helps your child feel a sense of control over his/her body.

- Emphasize** that no adult or older child has the right to touch a child's penis (vulva, etc), or to ask a child to touch his/her genitals. Explain that this includes family members. "I need you to tell me if that ever happens. It's important that you let me know... and not be worried that I might be upset."

- Tell** your child s/he does not have to blindly obey all adults. "It's wrong for a grown-up to ask you to lie or steal. It is wrong for a grown-up to touch you, or ask to be touched, in the bad ways we talked about. You should say 'no,' then come tell me."

- Differentiate** between "secret" and "surprise." A "surprise" is

something which is ok to reveal at some point (like a birthday present); tell your child s/he should not be told to keep secrets from you.

- Practice** "what if" with your child. "What if a stranger asked you to help find her lost dog; or the babysitter promised you more ice cream if he could touch your penis/vulva? What would you say/do?" Rehearse exact words and actions to help your child react in uncomfortable or dangerous situations.

These suggestions merely scratch the surface. Several excellent resources are available to help parents and children prevent sexual abuse:

- It's My Body** Lory Freeman
- A Very Touching Book** Jan Hindman
- A Little Bird Told Me About My Feelings** Marcia Morgan

Call your local Planned Parenthood, health department, physician or sexual assault center for additional suggestions.

The point is, awareness, communication, and assertiveness serve a child well. Instill these in your children, and you promote their protection and safety.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 4 - No. 5

What Do I Say? What Do I Do???

Perhaps this idea of paying careful attention to sexuality education for a 4-year-old is new to you. Relax. You're in good company

Historically, sex education consisted of "The Big Talk - Part I," which occurred sometime around puberty; and "The Big Talk - Part II" with the boy's version taking place during the dating years, and the girl's just prior to marriage.

Most of us have few good role models upon which to base our own children's sexuality education. We may be at a loss as to how to proceed - what to say or do.

By anticipating the sexual questions and behaviors which are typical for your pre-school child, you can prepare for them. This way, you have an opportunity to carefully choose - and practice - your responses well in advance.

Here are just a few of the sexual issues that come up for the 4-year-old, along with possible responses:

Q. How was I born?

A. That's a good question. What do you think about that?

Q. Did I come out of your stomach?

A. No. You grew in a special place inside me called the uterus. When you were ready to be born, you came out through an opening between my legs called the vagina.

Q. How do you make a baby?

A. Usually a mommy and daddy make a baby together. The daddy puts his penis into the mommy's vagina. A cell called a sperm cell comes through the daddy's penis and into the mommy where it joins a cell made by her body, called the egg cell. This starts a baby growing.

Q. Why don't girls have a penis?

A. Boys and girls are made differently. Only boys have a penis. Girls have other special parts that boys don't have.

Q. Like what?

A. Well, one special part a girl has is the uterus, which is where a baby can grow.

Andy: How come I shouldn't kiss you on the mouth, daddy?

Daddy: Who told you that, Andy?

Andy: My friend David. His dad told him boys don't kiss each other on the mouth.

Daddy: Well, maybe in David's family they don't kiss on the mouth. But you certainly can kiss

me on the mouth if you want. I love it when you give me a kiss!

Playing doctor: You've stumbled upon Laura and Tommy playing with their clothes off. They are busily listening to each other's hearts with a toy stethoscope.

Parent: I see you two are interested in bodies and how they work. I'd like you to put your clothes on while I get a picture book that explains all about bodies. Let's have some milk and cookies and look at it together.

Q. Why did the sitter tell me to stop touching my penis?

A. Different people believe different things. Some families think that it's not ok for a boy to touch or play with his penis. In our family we believe that it's ok... and it's something you do in private, like in your bedroom - not where other people can see.

While these are but a few of the normal sexual questions and behaviors you can expect from your 4-year-old, they tend to be the trickiest. Having a chance to reflect on them ahead of time will allow you to examine your own beliefs surrounding them. Based upon those beliefs, you can then shape the responses that reflect your attitudes and values.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 5 - No. 1

Kids Need To Know... Parents Need To Tell Them.

Certainly by age 5, a child has a good idea about where mom and dad stand on the subject of sex...and whether it's ok to even *talk* about it. From birth, children receive an array of messages about sexuality from their parents: **infants** who are held and cuddled learn about loving touch; **toddlers** exploring their bodies quickly discover their sexual parts - and their parents' reactions to their exploration; the **pre-schooler** who asks her dad, "Where's *my* penis?" becomes aware if sexual questions are ok to discuss (or not) in her family.

The 5-year-old has had a bit of experience in the world: interactions with family; exposure to other children and differing beliefs; TV, movies, magazines, advertising, music... which influence the developing sense of sexuality, either directly or indirectly. **Children cannot avoid the sexual messages that permeate life today.**

Natural situations, everyday moments and events lend themselves to a child's sex education. With or without your consent they occur, as the life and learning processes of your children unfold.

Parents may respond with silence, disgust, scolding... implying that sexuality is negative or dirty. Or, they may respond with delight, using these opportunities to offer loving, honest explanations... teaching the child that sexuality is a wonderful part of being human.

Families have so much to gain from open communication about sex. Taking the initiative to develop a dialogue of trust, parents can pass along important family values. Children have the opportunity to gain accurate information and a positive regard for sexuality.

The time to start this dialogue is early - earlier in fact than many parents would suspect. In today's complex world, perhaps even more so than in the past, children need and deserve thoughtful, purposeful sex education **from day one.**

But it's never too late to begin. And while you as a parent will not be your children's *only* sex educator, you can be (and *are*) their **first** and **most important.**

“What Will The Neighbors Think? “

“...or grandma and grandpa? How will they react to my openness with Kenny about sex?”

Everyone has his/her own feelings about sexuality and about messages that are appropriate for children. Chances are you'll find family members, friends and neighbors whose ideas and values are very different from your own. This can challenge your resolve to communicate openly and honestly with your child about sex. It may help to keep in mind what's at stake here... and **what's more important: your child's needs, or the opinion of others?**

There's a lot to be said for the child who knows that s/he can depend on mom and dad to respond to sexual questions and concerns with respect, support and honesty.

“But what if he goes around the neighborhood, sharing this information with all his friends? 'Men what?'”

So what. Let's face it. Kids frequently compare information with each other about sex, whether parents want them to or not. Usually it's *misinformation*. The bottom line here is that children deserve quality sex education. Parents need not apologize for providing that education - no matter *who* objects.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 5 - No. 2

Here We Go Again...

The sexual curiosities of your 5-year-old aren't so different from the ones at ages 3 and 4. You may think, "I'm sure I told you where babies come from," or "We've already discussed what 'belly-buttons' are all about, remember?"

Your 5-year-old probably *doesn't* remember. There's so much to learn... and this is complex stuff. Maybe your child *does* remember (sort of), and is just checking to make sure it's still ok to talk about sexual issues with you. Please be patient and supportive.

The goal of family sex education goes beyond the mere presentation of facts. **Ideally, parents seek to nurture in their child positive attitudes toward his/her body, gender, and sexuality.** One way to do this is to continue to be "askable" ... encourage sexual questions, acknowledge and discuss sexual behaviors, and initiate conversations about sexual issues.

But Scott's Dad Said...

As your 5-year-old becomes more involved with others (in pre-school, kindergarten, etc.), s/he will also be exposed to differing family attitudes and values. It can

be terribly confusing, so it's important that parents reemphasize personal beliefs. For example:

Johnny: *Scott's Dad got really mad today. He yelled at us for taking our clothes off.*

Dad: *What did he say?*

J: *He said we were nasty. We told him we were just pretending to be doctors, but he yelled at us again and made us put on our clothes.*

Scott's dad was alarmed at seeing his son and another boy undressed, looking at and touching each other's body. Perhaps he worried this was "abnormal," maybe he was upset because he believes nudity is inappropriate. His anger left the children feeling hurt, ashamed and "nasty."

Johnny's dad believes that "playing doctor" is a normal childhood experience - between same *and* other gender children. At this age, they're fascinated by bodies - how they look, feel, work ... and are especially interested in "how yours compares to mine."

He realizes that often parents forget that a child's sexual behavior does not have the same emotional significance that it does for adults.

He also appreciates that families have different values and beliefs surrounding sex.

His concern right now is to restore Johnny's positive feelings about himself, his body and his sexuality.

Dad: *Why do you suppose Scott's dad was so angry?*

Johnny: *He thought we were being nasty.*

D: *Do you think you were?*

J: *No.*

D: *Neither do I. You and Scott were interested in finding out about bodies. That's pretty normal.*

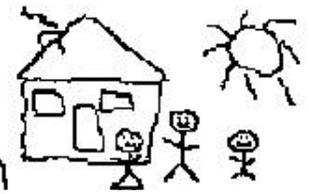
J: *Scott's dad thinks it's bad.*

D: *Well, he may believe it's not ok for kids to play without their clothes on. Some families feel that way. So when you're playing with Scott, be sure to respect that, and keep your clothes on. It's ok to be curious about bodies. In fact, I have a book that shows all kinds of bodies, and how they work. Let's read it!*

Johnny has heard some valuable messages: his dad re-enforced his willingness to discuss sexual issues with him and emphasized a positive attitude toward sexuality. He acknowledged that family beliefs differ, and it's important to respect that.

Good work, dad!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 5 - No. 3

Just When You Thought You Had It Handled...

We live in frightening times. The alarming incidence of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) has sparked serious concern - and at times irrational fear.

Many schools offer HIV/AIDS education, grades K-12. Increasingly, ads, news stories and public service announcements, talk of safer sex practices, condoms, gay, lesbian and heterosexual issues.

As parents of a kindergarten child, you're totally baffled. **Just what and how do you discuss HIV/AIDS with a 5-year-old?**

Your child doesn't need confusing details about the complexities of sexual relationships, sexual transmission of infection, etc. S/he *does* however, need you to address this scary topic that everyone's talking about.

It's an ideal time to discuss general concepts of wellness and staying healthy. **Help your child appreciate that much of his health is under his control.** Habits such as handwashing, dressing appropriately, eating nutritious foods, exercising, and getting plenty of rest promote good health. **Discuss basic facts about disease.** For example, explain

that some diseases like colds, flu, and chicken pox are caused by germs, which spread from person to person. If those germs get into his body, he may become ill. Ask if he has heard of AIDS (he'll likely say yes). Let him know that AIDS is a disease caused by a germ called a virus.

This may suffice for now, but expand if he shows interest or anxiety. Find out what he's heard about HIV/AIDS, and correct any misinformation.

Contact your child's school to see how teachers are dealing with the subject. Discussions at home can build upon information s/he's learning in school.

Appropriate messages about HIV/AIDS for a 5-year-old:

- AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV.
- Some viruses like HIV can only spread in special ways (e.g., by blood from an infected person getting into another person's body.
- We needn't avoid people who are HIV+ or who have AIDS. HIV is *not* easy to get. It is *not* spread by casual contact (e.g., shaking hands, hugging, sharing food, etc.).

We can't ignore the subject of HIV/AIDS and other STI's. Ne-

glecting or refusing to discuss this with children may only cause unnecessary alarm. On the other hand, initiating discussion can help allay their fears while providing important information to protect their health. At the same time, you once again reinforce that you value open family communication about sexual issues.

A Little Help?

While various issues of this newsletter discuss pertinent sexual topics, by necessity the scope is limited. Quality materials are available which provide extensive information and sex education strategies. Many address specifics not covered here (e.g., concerns of single-parents, adoptive, and blended families, gay- and lesbian-headed families):

How To Talk To Your Child About Sexuality

Planned Parenthood

Straight Talk Marilyn Ratner & Susan Chamlin

How Babies and Families are Made Patricia Schaffer

How To Talk To Your Child About AIDS New York University/SIIECUS

Heather Has Two Mommies Leslea Newman

Daddy's Roommate Michael Willhoite

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 5 - No. 4

Pregnancy/Childbirth 101

Little ones are fascinated by the babymaking process. Most 3- and 4-year-olds are interested in how baby “gets out of mommy.” Your 5-year-old’s concern is a bit trickier: “how baby gets in.” Not one to put curiosity on hold, s/he’s likely to insist on an explanation while you’re dining out at a restaurant, standing in line at the movies, or at some equally inconvenient spot.

Should the time or place be awkward for such discussion, say so - while at the same time supporting your child’s interest. A parent might say, “What a wonderful question! Let’s talk about that when we get home.” (Then do!)

Brief explanations about intercourse are appropriate for the 5-year-old. It’s highly preferable to magical stories of storks, fairy godmothers, and babies found on doorsteps. While a fable may temporarily get parents “off the hook,” it is truly a disservice to the child. Neglecting to respond honestly to sexual curiosities adds to a child’s confusion or discomfort about the issue.

A parent may simply choose to say: “When a mother and father want to have a baby, the father puts his penis into the mother’s vagina. This is very loving and

special. Sperm made by the father’s body move through his penis into the mother. If a sperm meets an egg cell made by the mother’s body, a baby will start to grow inside the mother’s uterus.”

When providing this detail, keep in mind that a 5-year-old is very literal. The term “egg” needs clarification, lest your child envisions mommy producing chicken eggs. Remember too, the correct word “sperm” rather than “seed” avoids the notion of flowers blooming in mommy’s uterus.

If you’ve successfully made your way through the babymaking talk, congratulations! The topic’s not been laid to rest, however - just as you suspected. Your 5-year-old will ask this one several more times (over the next few years) before s/he’s gotten it straight. You can look forward to a lot more practice.

When Children Don’t Ask

If your 5-year-old doesn’t seem the least bit interested in sexual issues and hasn’t asked any questions, it’s time to initiate discussion.

The easiest way to begin is with “teachable moments” - everyday events that lend themselves to conversations about sexuality (a

neighbor is pregnant, the hamsters are mating, etc.). Make deliberate attempts to educate your child:

- Children’s **picture books** on sexuality can be wonderful! Read them together.
- Look at **family albums** with pictures of weddings, mom - when she was pregnant, or the new baby coming home.
- Comment on a **news item** that deals with sexuality.
- Watch **movies/TV** together.
- Ask your child to draw a **picture** that shows a baby being born. Talk about the process.

You might consider that your child has indeed been asking about sexuality - often in non-verbal ways - since birth. You may not have recognized it as such, or perhaps you’ve given an impression that it’s not ok to ask. Whatever has or has not been going on, start something now. Since your children are learning about sex whether you tell them or not, surely you want to get your 2¢ worth in too!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Age 5 - No. 5

Say Again?

J. Hey dad, do you use tom-toms sometimes too?

D. What do you mean, Jim?

J. You know, **tom-toms**. Like mom has.

D. Jimmy, tom-toms are drums. Mom has drums?

J. No...come on. I'll show ya.

With that, Jimmy drags dad to the bathroom, opens the cabinet and pulls out a blue box. Dad's face breaks into a grin. "Oh **those!** They're called **tampons**, not **tom-toms!**"

Why clutter up a 5-year-old's head with talk of menstruation - and a boy at that! Well... because he asked. While shopping with his mom, Jimmy saw her pick up a box of tampons. Naturally curious, he asked about them - and, valuing family communication about sexual issues, his mom explained. Jimmy has since forgotten what "tom-toms" are all about, so he's asking dad.

D. Do you know what tampons are for, Jimmy?

J. Mom told me, but I forget.

D. Well, each month, inside a woman's uterus, a special lining grows. If the woman becomes pregnant, that lining is needed to help the baby grow and develop. If the woman doesn't become pregnant, the lining passes out of

her body through the vagina. It's called having a period. The lining has blood in it, and the tampon is placed in the vagina to catch the blood so it doesn't stain her clothes. The bleeding is very normal. Make sense?

J. Well, sort of.

D. Only women have periods, so I don't need to wear tampons - and neither will you.

A young child might be alarmed if s/he discovers a used tampon or sanitary pad. Associating blood with injury, s/he may fear mom is hurt. So it's important to give children accurate information.

Besides the fact that Jimmy deserves an honest answer, his parents appreciate that he will be interacting with females throughout his life. He needs to understand how their bodies work, as well as his own. There's no point in keeping body functions a mystery. By explaining issues such as menstruation as normal and healthy, parents help children accept them as so.

Another Tough One ...

As is true for most sexual topics, there's no right or wrong answer for the question of masturbation. Each family must make a decision based upon personal values and beliefs. Along with this guideline, consider the following:

- Most children fondle their genitals - often when they're tired, bored, nervous - as well as for pleasure!

- Masturbation is normal; not masturbating is also normal.

- There is no physical or psychological harm associated with masturbation. If a child masturbates excessively (interfering with other normal activities), it may indicate a problem. Parents would want to call their physician or health care provider.

If parents disapprove of masturbation, they can express that without causing the child to feel ashamed or guilty.

Parents who accept that masturbation is a normal activity, need to help their child understand the concepts of appropriate time and place: "I know it feels good to touch your genitals. But do so in private - not where others can see you." This sets important limits for the child.

For some parents, masturbation may never be a comfortable topic to discuss, yet it's important to do so. If parents merely ignore the behavior or try to divert the child's attention with a toy or different activity, they've missed an ideal "teachable moment" to share information and values.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 1 - No. 1

Let's Talk

This is it. First grade - *real* school. The *big time*. Time to experience delight and pride as you watch your child learn, develop, grow. It's also a time when many parents feel a twinge (at least) of discomfort - some anxiety about the dose of "outside influences" to which their children will now be exposed.

First graders are gaining a stronger sense of themselves in relation to a larger social world; they begin to measure themselves against new friends and school acquaintances; what they see, hear and read makes an impression. The importance of having that backlog of trust and open communication with your child suddenly becomes perfectly clear - especially in the area of sexuality.

If such a history hasn't been established, it's not too late to begin. But please, **do begin now** - for the early years are critical as your child develops attitudes toward sexuality. And, it's far easier to initiate discussions about sex while children are young.

Open family discussions about sex can:

- allow parents to share important family values;
- assist children in forming a positive attitude and healthy respect toward sexuality;

•ease fears and anxieties children often have around sexual curiosity;

•build trust, understanding, and support;

•increase the likelihood that children will seek out parents for information and guidance in the future.

Your child is launching his school career. What better gift to give him than your commitment to support growth and understanding in *all* aspects of his personhood - including sexuality.

OK...Where Do I Begin???

Begin by appreciating where 1st graders are at with their sexual curiosity. At this age, many children are hesitant about asking questions related to sex. By the time they're six, children have developed a fairly perceptive "radar" alerting them to topics, behaviors, etc., that adults find unacceptable or uncomfortable. So they're wary of saying or doing things that might cause trouble.

The early grade school child is naturally curious about many sexual issues - *whether that interest is verbalized or not*. It is the wise parent who encourages communication.

You might try asking questions about sexual issues you think may be of interest to your child. For the 1st grader these usually include:

- where babies come from
- body parts/functions
- male/female differences, roles, and expectations
- sexual language

In discussing these issues, with your child, remember:

- *You are the expert* at passing along family values about sexuality. You do have the answers in your heart, though you may need some practice with the words.
- *Listen to your child's questions* - and be sure you understand what s/he's really asking.
- *Answer simply and honestly.*
- *You needn't worry about telling "too much, too soon."* Children absorb what they are ready to, and are not overstimulated, encouraged, or whatever by more detail. **The real danger lies in "too little, too late."**

Family sex education offers you, as parents, a wonderful opportunity to speak from the heart to the children you love. **Enjoy!**

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 1 - No. 2

Silent No More

“Don't take candy from strangers.” Remember the classic warning from your own childhood? Usually coupled with “Never talk to strangers,” this rather vague precaution never quite spoke to mom's and dad's *true* concern. Today, we don't dare skirt the issue. **We must talk with our children, in no un-certain terms, about sexual abuse.**

Studies suggest that 1 out of every 4 children in this country experiences some form of sexual victimization before age 17; 15% - 20% are boys. Contrary to the early warnings of our own parents the typical child molester is *not* the stranger who entices children with candy. The majority of sexual abusers are adult heterosexual males who are rarely strangers. In fact, 70-80% are known to the child - and often are relatives.

By fostering self-reliance and assertiveness in their children, parents help protect them against sexual abuse. But what else can be done?

First, families must abandon the idea that “it can't happen to me.” Sexual abuse crosses all socioeconomic lines, all religious and ethnic walks of life. **Every child must learn safety information and survival skills.**

- Have your child use proper terms for body parts. Substitute “penis,” “vulva,” etc. for vague descriptors like “private parts” and “down there.”

- Emphasize that your child's body is his own - no one has the right to touch him in ways he doesn't like. He has the right to say “no” to unwanted or uncomfortable touch.

- Let your child decide whether to be affectionate. Imposing hugs and kisses is unfair, and lessens a child's feeling of control over her own body.

- Explain that no adult has the right to touch a child's penis (vulva, etc.) or ask a child to touch his/her genitals. This applies to family members too (explain possible exceptions such as a parent helping at bath time).

- Tell your child she has the right to say “no” to any adult who asks her to do something wrong. “It's wrong for a grown-up to ask you to lie or steal; to touch you or ask to be touched in the ways we talked about. You should say of 'no,' then come and tell me.”

- Explain that no one should insist your child keep secrets from you. “If someone touches your penis/vulva, and warns you not to tell me, it may be because it was

wrong for them to do that. Secrets and surprises are different. Surprises (like the present mom bought dad for his birthday) can eventually be told.”

- Practice “what if” with your child. “What if the babysitter promised you could stay up later if you touched his penis?” “What if a stranger came to the door while I was in the shower?” Rehearse specific words and actions. Help your child know what to do if s/he feels threatened - where to go and names of trusted adults who can help if parents are not available.

Talking about sexual abuse isn't easy. You worry about frightening the children, about what to say, how to say it. Much anxiety stems from the discomfort people often have about discussing sexual issues in general. In addition to the general tips offered here, there are excellent resources available through your local Planned Parenthood, health department, physician's office or sexual assault center.

A Very Touching Book Jan Hindman

Loving Touches Lori Freeman
It's My Body Lori Freeman

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 1 - No. 3

No Gender Limitations

“That’s *girl* stuff,” insists Tim when you ask him to help set the dinner table. “Boys aren’t supposed to do *girl* stuff.”

Cringing at the hint of superiority in his voice, you think, “Wait a minute. Where did *that* come from?” This isn’t the non-sexist attitude you’ve encouraged in your son. Recently he’s made several comments smacking of traditional male/female stereotyping. What’s up with that?

Old influences die hard. The school-age child has ventured into a world where s/he is exposed daily to individuals with a lot of old habits. Historically, expectations - and *limitations* - based on gender have been a way of life in this society: one set of standards, values, and behaviors considered acceptable for boys; a different set established for girls. Our general attitude about this is changing, yet in many families, traditional biases persist.

The “liberated male” you’ve been raising these last six years is beginning to feel the tugs of peer influence. For the most part, he’d rather hang out with the guys at school; their opinions about him carry a lot of weight. Pressures to conform, fit in, be one of the group (and *think* like the group)

start competing with family influence.

It’s an important time to remind the 6-year-old that **goals and expectations need not be limited by gender**. Help your child appreciate that both boys and girls are capable of a myriad of accomplishments. This can boost his/her self-esteem and personal growth.

To broaden your child’s perspective regarding gender role expectations:

- Share** household chores.
- Read** stories portraying both males and females in a variety of non-traditional roles.
- Use** language that avoids stereotyping (e.g., mail carrier rather than mailman, flight attendant instead of stewardess; he **or** she in reference to doctors, nurses, etc.) Awkward? Perhaps... but well worth the effort.

As parents work to expand their children’s horizons, they may find themselves at odds with influences of the outside world. Rather than set up a “We’re right, they’re wrong” struggle, it’s useful to approach it as “here’s *another* way to look at things.” Certainly in the arena of sex role expectations, it’s empowering to offer children another way to look at things.

Cry “Foul!”

The 1st grader may often use an obscenity without having the vaguest idea of its meaning. Past experience has proven the word to be an attention getter. Maybe that’s all s/he wants. Or, s/he may be curious about the term, but unsure how to ask for permission to discuss it.

Either way, by calmly defining the word, parents *neutralize its shock value, provide accurate information, and reaffirm their willingness to discuss sexual issues*. A parent could say, for example: “That word is a mean way of saying _____. It’s often intended to be hurtful. Please find other words to say what you’re feeling.”

If a child uses bad language out of anger, frustration, etc., it’s helpful to let her know that while the emotion is perfectly acceptable, the language is not. Then assist her in finding alternate words to express her feelings.

Finally, parents might want to monitor their own vocabulary. “Do as I say, not as I do” has little impact. Model the behaviors you wish to encourage.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 1 - No. 4

But What If...

Many parents admit to avoiding discussion of sexual issues with their children. With great relief, they'll seize any opportunity to get off the hook, assuming that somewhere along the line, kids will learn what they need to know.

It's likely that these very same parents truly *want* to be involved in their children's sexuality education...yet feel ill-prepared to do so. Fear, confusion, and embarrassment are just a few barriers that often get in the way. Let's see if the way can be smoothed a bit by addressing some of the concerns parents have expressed:

- ***I'm worried that giving my child too much sexual information will stimulate curiosity and encourage him to experiment.*** This is related to the fear of telling too much, too soon. The fact is, a child's interest in sexual issues needs no encouragement. That natural curiosity is alive and well from birth! When efforts to learn about sexuality are ignored, denied - or worse yet, punished - children may become preoccupied with the subject, and more compelled to experiment.

- ***But she's only in 1st grade. Isn't that too young?*** For lengthy, graphic detail? Of course. Your

explanations can be simple, clear, and factual. At the same time, leave the door open for further discussion. Remember, now is the time to establish the foundation for open communication... an environment in which your child knows it is safe and appropriate to ask questions or voice opinions.

Remember too that **every day your 1st grader hears a great deal about sexuality** ... from friends ... from the media ... S/he certainly deserves to hear it from you.

- ***I don't want to frighten or confuse my child.*** Parents often voice this concern specific to topics such as sexual abuse, childbirth, etc. Truly, the bottom line is that children are more concerned and confused when they only have bits and pieces of information... or misinformation. It leaves much to their imagination, which can fabricate some rather frightening details.

Know that by 1st grade, your child has heard *something* about sexual abuse, childbirth, etc., even if s/he has not heard it from you. It's best to introduce such topics, discuss them calmly and openly, and allow your child to express any concerns or questions.

- ***I'm not sure I have my facts straight.*** That can be the *least* of

your worries. If you don't know the answer, say so. Then offer to look it up. Better yet, suggest that the two of you go to the library, and look it up together.

In addition to providing factual information, many excellent resources offer help in the "how to" department. Check with your local Planned Parenthood, public health department or private physician.

Unfortunately, children are hearing the most about sex from friends and the media. Surely parents do not *prefer* this. When offered information, skills, assurance, and support, parents can embrace their role as family sex educators with confidence!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 1 - No. 5

It's All About Self-Concept

It's hard to believe that first grade is almost over. What a milestone for your youngster: a full year of *real school* just about completed

Along with accomplishments, perhaps your first grader has also experienced some failure and frustration. How has s/he fared? As a whole, has the year been a joyful experience? A positive introduction to the academic world?

And just *what* does any of this have to do with sex education? Plenty. It's all about self-concept.

You see, *research tells us that the sexual decisions and behaviors of adolescents are influenced by their level of self-esteem.* High self-esteem correlates with an increased likelihood that choices will be positive, healthy, and responsible.

It is during the early years that children begin developing a sense of their "OK-ness." The formulation of self-esteem during the pre-school years is based largely on input from the family. If Steven is constantly told he's a "bad boy," he'll soon define himself as such - and act accordingly. If, however, his parents emphasize that it is his *behavior* which is unacceptable (not Steven himself), he maintains his personal

sense of "OK-ness" and self-respect.

Upon entering the educational system, a child is exposed to pressures, demands, and expectations that reach beyond the home-front. It becomes especially important for parents to reassure their child that a sense of worth comes from within - and is not a function of appearance, being a math whiz, or getting the lead in the class play.

As with all other aspects of growth and development, children need assistance in feeling competent, connected, and valued. Through their childrearing practices, parents either foster or stifle that development.

Approval - Children have a special need for praise. For them, parents' approval is a measure of their own value. Frequently recognize and praise your youngster for a job well done or a good effort.

Acceptance - While recognizing your child's strengths and abilities, assist him in accepting his weaknesses. If he acts inappropriately, be sure he understands that while you do not like the *behavior*, you still love *him*.

Attention - By demonstrating sincere interest in your child's day to

day activities, you let her know she is important. Having mom's and dad's *undivided attention* - however brief - helps a child feel very special indeed.

Achievement - Children learn by doing... and need opportunities to practice new skills. Allowing them to make decisions will encourage a sense of competence and responsibility.

Respect - *Children are people too*, and they deserve to be treated fairly - with dignity and respect.

All of this may seem so obvious. Yet it's amazing how much good, common-sense parenting gets lost in the daily bustle of family life. Consider this simply a reminder.

The way children feel about themselves colors the way they live and relate to the world around them. Children who grow up feeling loved, competent, and worthy are far better equipped - as adolescents and adults - to deal with the issues of life... including sexuality.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 2 - No. 1

Even in Elementary School, Kids Are Learning All About Sex...

from their friends... from the media... from... ??? Surely, *they deserve to learn from mom and dad.*

It should be no surprise to parents that young children gather lots of sexual (mis)information on a daily basis. Why, remember just last weekend when you stumbled upon Nick, your little 2nd grader and his buddy, Craig? They were having quite a chat... intense and lengthy whispers punctuated by fits of giggling. All of that came to an abrupt halt the moment they spotted you! Chances are good their conversation had something to do with sex.

And what about the movie you took the family to see the other day? You were careful to select an appropriate show for the children. What you hadn't counted on were the steamy coming attractions for next week's feature. You were more than a bit uncomfortable - and somewhat unnerved by Nick's obvious interest in the whole thing.

Let's face it. Your children are hearing about sexual topics whether you tell them or not. There *are* advantages to having you tell them.

You are the expert when it comes to passing along your family values related to sexuality. You may need a little encouragement - some assistance in overcoming your discomfort. Perhaps you'd like a few tips on how to begin - or how much to say. That's all fine tuning. But ***the heart of the message*** - your values and attitudes surrounding sexuality - ***is within you.***

When parents are actively involved in their child's sexuality education, they can ensure that accuracy prevails. **We know that children are exposed to massive doses of misinformation and exploitive, irresponsible messages about sex - from their friends... from the media...** So it makes good sense for parents to blaze a trail of honest, informative communication. Be available to dispel the myths, and set the record straight. (*Of course, be sure you have the facts straight yourself!*)

Ultimately, we wish for our children a sense of appreciation and high regard for their sexuality. We want them to enjoy and celebrate that very special part of their being. We want them to have self-respect - good feelings about themselves... *every part of themselves, including their sexuality.* What better way to promote that vision than by providing lov-

ing, thoughtful sex education at home.

Today's parents are raising children in a world that differs markedly from that of their youth. Intense peer and media pressures encourage sexual activity at younger ages. *The threats of sexual abuse, HIV, etc. demand that we speak to our children - in graphic detail - early on.*

Amidst all of this, the challenge is to avoid scare tactics and deliver messages which present sexuality in a positive light. The following are but a few of the resources which can assist parents in framing those messages:

Talking With Your Child About Sex

Mary Calderone and James Ramey

Sex: The Facts, The Acts, And Your Feelings

Michael Carrera

Sex Without Shame: Encouraging the Child's Healthy Sexual Development

Alayne Yates

How to Talk to Your Child About AIDS

New York University and SIECUS

How to Talk to Your Child About Sexuality

Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 2 - No. 2

Now What Do I Say???

Dana: Mom, what's "gay" mean?

Mom: Well... it depends how the word is used. (*good strategy - that bought you a little time*) Tell me what you've heard. (*nice - clarify what she's asking*)

Dana: At school today, David called Max gay, and said he was going to get AIDS.

OK mom, that settles it. Dana's not referring to the happy-go-lucky "gay." It also sounds like she's wondering about HIV/AIDS. You're on.

Consider this a great opportunity for you and Dana to have an informative discussion. I know, I know... you're a little nervous. OK - a *lot* nervous. Dana's only seven! She's asking some pretty sophisticated questions!

Kids *are* growing up fast these days. The AIDS crisis is speeding up the process as the subject is aired in the media - and in the schoolyard. It can be most confusing and alarming to a 2nd grader. The good news is this tragic disease has created wonderful invitations for parents and kids to talk about sexual issues.

Dana's mom can be pleased that her daughter felt comfortable asking this question. By responding calmly and honestly, mom will reaffirm her willingness to dis-

cuss sexual topics with Dana. But, exactly *what* should she say?

She might try something like this: "Some men have loving relationships with other men rather than women. That's called being gay. Some women have loving relationships with other women rather than men." She could also point out that these relationships are important and fulfilling for the couple. This may lead to further questions like, "Is that bad?" or "Why do people do that?"

Talking with children about sexual orientation can stir up complex emotions. In discussing this issue, parents can help their children avoid developing prejudices.

If a parent disapproves of homosexuality for religious or other reasons, s/he might say: "Families have different opinions about this. What I believe is..." No matter what, be sure your child clearly hears that it is never OK to hurt or discriminate against someone because of their sexual orientation.

Often, children repeat derogatory terms they've heard such as "fag" or "queer," and may have little or no idea of the meaning. Parents can define the terms, explaining that they are cruel labels intended to hurt and tease.

Dana has also raised the subject of AIDS. This is a hot topic, with a mix of fear and misinformation being passed back and forth. *It's best they have a chance to hear from mom and dad.*

Your 2nd grader can be told that:

- AIDS is a serious disease which is caused by a virus.

- The virus is passed from person to person *in specific ways*: for example, if someone has unprotected sexual intercourse *with an infected person*, or shares needles for injected drug use with that person.

- HIV infection and AIDS doesn't just happen to people who are gay. It can happen to anyone who behaves in specific ways that might put them at risk. (Be prepared to further explain what those risky behavior include:

- We don't have to be afraid of people with AIDS. *The disease is not spread by casual contact.* We can hug them, share food with them, sit next to them, etc.

- *AIDS can be prevented* - and neither of you is likely to get it.

As with all sexual issues, it's important to leave the door open for further discussion of AIDS. A good rule of thumb is "*if they ask the question, they deserve an honest answer.*" Young children may not need graphic detail. They do need to know they can depend on mom and dad to respond to their questions.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 2 - No. 3

You Thought That Was Hard - Wait 'Til You Try *This*...

Remember the days when, as a pre-schooler, your child showed great interest in how babies were made? At times you may have fretted that the interest felt more like preoccupation. In reality, your youngster was just naturally - and appropriately - curious about a fascinating subject.

As a 2nd grader, your child may be no less fascinated by the babymaking process (although s/he is more sensible now about blurting out the question in a crowded elevator). **Resist the temptation to assume that your previous discussions have thoroughly covered the topic.** Despite the eloquent explanations you may have delivered in the past, the story bears repeating, yet again.

You see, at this age children have some difficulty grasping the notion of intercourse. Even more confusing to them is “why *anyone* would want to do *that*.” And of course, the most incredulous wonder of all is that “since there are two kids in our family, mom and dad actually did that – *twice*!

Talking with children about sexual intercourse in the context of

making babies may cause varying degrees of anxiety for parents. But really, it's pretty straightforward. On the other hand, **the thought of helping your child realize that mom and dad experience sexual intimacy for pleasure may stop you dead, in your tracks.**

Is that ok to talk about? Of course. It's important - and only fair - that children learn about this aspect of sexuality. **Parents are truly the ideal source of this information, for they can provide it within a framework of love and values.**

There are ample opportunities to bring up the subject of intercourse. Perhaps a neighbor is pregnant, you've just dug out your child's baby pictures, or there's a TV special on about pregnancy and childbirth. These “teachable moments” provide a springboard for discussion that might go something like this:

Dad: I'll never forget the day we told you mom was having another baby. You were about 4 - and so excited! You had a million questions about how babies are made.

Son: Did you tell me?

Dad: Of course! We explained that when a man and woman have intercourse, a sperm cell from the

man's body may join an ovum - or egg cell - made by the woman's body. This is how a baby starts. Do you remember what intercourse is?

Son: I'm not sure.

Dad: When a man and woman want to be very close with each other in a special, loving way, the man puts his penis into the woman's vagina. That's called sexual intercourse.

Son: So people do that when they want a baby?

Dad: Yes, but that's not the only reason. People have intercourse to share a loving, pleasurable experience with each other. It may be hard for you to understand - and that's OK. Intercourse is not for children to do. It's a sexual sharing for adults.

At some point in the not too distant future, you will want to begin discussing this issue in a much larger context: risks and responsibilities involved in sexual intimacy, the decision to become pregnant, teenage pregnancy, etc. Open and loving communication with your 2nd grader will help pave the way.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 2 - No. 4

If You Can't Beat 'Em ...

The U.S. has one of the most intensive sex education programs in the world. Sadly, it's not happening in the classroom. Nor is it coming from parents. It's appearing in the media (TV, advertisements, music, on the Internet, etc.) and *it's not what our children need.*

Numerous studies reveal the potential for media to influence the knowledge and attitudes of young people:

- From early childhood through high school, television consumes more time than any other single activities besides sleeping.
- By age 18, the average student has spent 15,000 hours watching TV as compared to 11,000 in school.
- A Junior Achievement study reports that media ranks 3rd behind peers and parents in influencing values and behaviors of youth.

Every day, media messages replete with sexual references, innuendoes, and behaviors assault the senses. What's a parent to do? Demand censorship? Isolate children? While we can set boundaries, it's unrealistic to think these messages will be completely eliminated from our children's lives. We *can* however, monitor what children listen to, watch and

read. More importantly, we can listen, watch and read along with them - then discuss it as a family.

Instead of spending energy criticizing and blaming the media, use it to your advantage. It's a wonderful discussion starter! Call attention to sexual messages conveyed by programs, ads, music videos, web sites, etc. Ask your children how they feel about them, and share your own values surrounding the issue. The media "teaches" about a broad spectrum of sexuality-related concerns: relationships, stereotypes, sex roles, etc. Take note of these too.

By helping young children recognize and examine media messages about sexuality, parents assist them in developing critical viewing skills. Not only does this equip children with a "filter" through which to process the messages, it also provides opportunity to strengthen family communication about sex.

Self Esteem: A Fundamental Building Block

Second grade is a time of busy social development for children. Along with increasing concern about "what my friends think of me," there's a natural desire to further separate from mom and dad.

Don't be fooled by this surge of independence. Back off enough to allow your youngster to "test his wings," *but don't back off too far.* Despite close ties to outside friends and activities, *children need to feel secure in their parents' love for them.*

While your 2nd grader may resist - even refuse - your hugs and kisses (especially where others can see!), s/he still appreciates the offer. So please don't automatically withdraw usual displays of affection, assuming your child no longer wants or needs them. Continue to check in with, "Hey, I'd sure love to give you a kiss. What do you say?"

Children of all ages need to feel loved and valued. When parents take time to remind them of their "specialness," it bolsters their self-esteem.

The link between self-esteem and adolescent sexual behavior has received much attention. Positive self-regard increases the likelihood of healthy, more responsible choices - about sex as well as other issues.

A young child's self-esteem requires conscious tending and nurturing - and parents are just right for the job!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 2 - No. 5

More Than Meets the Eye

When you think about sex education, what topics come to mind? Anatomy... intercourse... pregnancy... puberty...? Anything else?

While these are all components of sex education, they comprise only a *tiny fraction* of the subject. These are the issues that relate to the plumbing part of sexuality - or as some kids refer to it, the "organ recital." You know ... the mechanics.

Let's **consider sexuality education in much broader terms**, consisting of all of the above, as well as issues like **body image, self-esteem, love, relationships, respect for self and others, values, decision-making**, and much, much more. It is truly a massive, complex, and fascinating subject.

As a parent, you routinely address these issues within your family in many ways. While doing so, you're also providing the mortar and brick for your child's developing sexual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

It's all a matter of "sex" vs. "sexuality": *sex* being a fairly narrow term, usually synonymous with gender or intercourse; *sexuality* referring to that integral part of our being which defines who

we are as males or females; our attitudes, values, and feelings around that; and how this affects our relationship to the world - and the world to us.

A tremendous amount of sexual curiosity and learning has occurred for your 2nd grader over the last 8 years, whether you've taken an active, positive role or not. Your responses (or lack of) to questions about "plumbing"; the modeling of relationships between you and your partner, family members, and friends; sharing of values; nurturance of your child's self-esteem... all this and more have formed the bulk of your youngster's sexuality education.

In years to come, the sexual specifics - those issues more readily identified as "sex education" - will become increasingly complex: puberty, gender orientation, teenage sexual activity, birth control, sexually transmitted infections. In giving your child the facts, your continued attention to the fundamentals of self-esteem, love, respect, etc. will help insure a positive - and practical - learning experience.

You're Not Alone

Many parents say they have a harder time discussing the emotions, values... the "intangibles"

of sexuality with their children than they do talking about the mechanics. Seeing and hearing some ways to go about dealing with the "intangibles" may be helpful. Beyond books, what other assistance is available something with a more personal touch?

- **Community schools and colleges** frequently offer parenting classes including aspects of sexuality education.

- **Physicians, family counselors, and members of the clergy** may also provide valuable insights.

- **Your child's school or the local school district office** may have suggestions on programs available for parents.

- **Planned Parenthood** is an excellent source of education programs and materials.

- Consider forming a **support group** in which parents can share concerns, ideas, and strategies. It helps to know that others are working on the same issues!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 3 - No. 1

It's Time to Talk

How was the subject of sex handled in your family when you were growing up? Was it a fairly open topic? Were your parents willing to talk about sexual issues in a frank and honest manner? Did they encourage you to discuss questions or concerns you might have?

If the answer is yes, consider yourself fortunate - and unusual. *Those raised in families which placed a high priority on open, honest communication about sex are truly a rare breed.*

Traditionally, sex education in America has been of the "too little, too late" variety. Perhaps it was assumed that "when the time comes, the kids will figure out what they need to know." That approach didn't work well *then* - and it certainly doesn't work *now*. **So... how many of you want to do things differently with your children?**

We live in a sexually explicit world. Children hear all kinds of sexual references and (mis) information at an early age. If parents were privy to the schoolyard conversations of typical 3rd graders, they might well be shocked! **Sexuality is fascinating to these kids - a subject they chatter about with significant inaccuracy.** This isn't

surprising, considering *their two main sources of information tend to be each other and the media.* Not a comforting thought.

So you see, **the issue is not "sex education: yes or no?" but "sex education: when and by whom?"**

First and foremost, parents need to be the "whom." After all, *as a parent, you are the expert when it comes to passing along family values around sexuality.* You are the one who can best speak from the heart, offering guidance and support to the children you love. This is not to say that accurate, useful information is unavailable elsewhere. But certainly parents need to be the key providers of that education.

Ideally, the "when" would be from birth. Truly, this is the time to begin establishing a conscious and loving family environment designed to promote positive attitudes toward sexuality. Remember that parents communicate - in both verbal and non-verbal ways - perceptions, beliefs, and judgments about sexuality. This communication begins, often unconsciously, with the birth of their child. And it has powerful, long-term impact on that child's developing attitudes.

Children raised in families that value and promote open commu-

nication about sex are more likely to form a positive, respectful outlook toward sexuality. We know this from research, from experience and from just plain common sense. We also know that over the years, this translates into greater ability to make positive, healthy, and respectful decisions about sex.

It may be tempting to shrug all of this off with "Hey, I didn't get much sex education from my parents - and I turned out ok." But keep in mind: our world has changed dramatically since we were kids. What may have sufficed in the past is grossly inadequate now.

Keep in mind too that you needn't go it alone. There are many excellent resources to support and assist you. Check with your local Planned Parenthood, health department or physician.

Talking With Your Child About Sex Drs. Mary S. Calderone and James W. Ramey

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 3 - No. 2

You Did What????!!

The note from Danny's teacher left you speechless. It seems your 3rd grader and some of his buddies were caught poring over a "girlie" magazine brought to school by an older boy.

"This must be one of those I 'teachable moments' I keep hearing about," you say to yourself. But at this point, you're frozen with disbelief, anger... perhaps a mixture of emotions you haven't quite sorted out yet.

Well, there's a good starting point: take time to sort out what you're feeling, and why. That will help you figure out how to best respond to this incident. An "emotional inventory" will take some time - which you can buy with a simple "Danny, I need to think about this awhile before we talk. Let's discuss it after dinner."

You may decide you're feeling *embarrassed* by Danny's behavior ("What must his teacher think of me? Maybe she thinks we have those kinds of magazines around our house!"); *angry* ("How could Danny look at that trash!"); *betrayed and hurt* ("I've worked at teaching Danny to be positive and respectful about sexuality. Then he turns around and does something like this!").

Now that you've identified *how* and *why* you feel as you do, **take a moment to consider why Danny might have been interested in such a magazine.** Of course, the easiest way to do this would be to *ask him*. In fact, be sure you do so. Not only will this give him a chance to explain, it will likely provide a good opening for a frank discussion about sexual issues.

But for now, consider some possibilities: **Danny was curious** to see what female bodies look like; he wanted to **go along with his friends; it was tempting to do something "forbidden"**; all of the above.

You remember reading somewhere that **it isn't at all uncommon for young children to sneak a look at "girlie" magazines out of curiosity.** A harsh parental response often leaves them feeling embarrassed, guilty, or ashamed of their sexual curiosity. In fact, it may further encourage curiosity as they try to discover why they're so upset.

In any case, keep in mind that children this age continue their fascination with the human body. **During this pre-puberty phase, it would be helpful and reassuring for Danny to learn what bodies are all about at various stages of development.** Please

don't hesitate to use one of the many educational books available on this topic. Read it with him, explaining how bodies look and function; how male and female anatomy differs; how bodies change during puberty, etc.

Along with this, **remind Danny how you feel about magazines which are sexually exploitive.** Help him appreciate that these publications can be *offensive*, and portray sexuality in a *negative light*.

You're feeling better now, pleased that you took the time to size up the situation and put it in perspective. After all, the "knee-jerk" reaction often results in messages you later regret. Such a response can be more damaging than the original offense itself.

You now have a clear sense of what you want Danny to learn from all of this, and how you want to present your message to him.

"Danny, let's talk."

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 3 - No. 3

Tell Me About...

If you accept Freud's "latency" theory, you believe 3rd graders haven't the slightest interest in sexuality. *While it's true that many children this age hesitate to ask adults questions about sex, it's not due to a lack of interest.*

On the contrary, 3rd graders are bursting with unanswered - typically unasked - questions about sexual issues. The reality is, they've often learned the subject is not ok to discuss. A few disapproving looks or shocked, angry responses are all it takes to drive that message home.

In your own family, you may have worked hard to establish an environment which supports and encourages communication. But remember that your child's immersion in the outside world brings many influences into his life. Like it or not, societal attitudes toward the discussion of sexuality are still fraught with guilt, embarrassment, shame, fear, etc.

So you may find yourself needing to prod a bit more to get the conversation flowing. There's no need to force the issue - but do continue to remind your child that you're eager and willing to talk.

The following are typical 3rd grade questions (and possible - not absolute - responses) which are often left unshared between parent and child:

Q. How old do you have to be to have a baby?

A. As soon as a girl begins to menstruate, she is able to have a baby. Some girls begin menstruating as young as 10 or 11. Just because she is old enough to become pregnant doesn't mean she's ready to be a mother. Being a parent is a big job. It's best for girls to wait until they're grown up before they have babies.

Q. What about boys? When can they become fathers?

A. As soon as a boy begins producing sperm, he can cause a pregnancy. Some boys are producing sperm at age 13 or 14. But again, just because he's physically able to make a baby, doesn't mean he's ready for the responsibilities of fatherhood.

Q. When will my breasts grow?

A. Different people develop at different times. You're getting close to the age when your body will begin changing... including your breasts getting bigger. I was about 12 when I started developing. Maybe you'll take after me.

Q. Do boys have periods?

A. No. Remember that a period is the shedding of the lining that develops in a woman's uterus.

Q. Why is my penis so small?

A. Your penis is just the right size for your age. As you get older and start developing, your penis will get bigger.

Q. Brian's sister is having a baby and she's not even married. How can that be?

A. If a man and woman have sexual intercourse, whether they're married or not, the woman might get pregnant. Personally, I would want to be married before having a baby. I think that's the best way for me to raise my family. Other people may have different beliefs about that.

Q. Kelsey got in trouble for saying f--k. Why's it so bad?

A. It's a mean word for sexual intercourse. It's usually said in anger, or to hurt someone.

Children can be pretty resourceful. *If they really want answers to these questions yet presume they can't approach mom and dad, they'll find other ways to satisfy their curiosity.* Some of which may be useless. Or inappropriate. Or harmful.

So, a good rule of thumb is: file Freud's conclusion about "latency" under "Insufficient Data" - and keep talking with your kids.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 3 - No. 4

The Winds of Change

I know what you're thinking: My child's only in 3rd grade. There's no sense in filling his/her head with talk about development, body changes during puberty, etc. **When s/he starts to develop, then we'll talk."**

What's troubling about this attitude is that it overlooks the value of preparing children - *ahead of time* - for the experiences of puberty. Certainly, parents stack the odds in favor of smoother sailing if they address these issues well in advance. This allows children the benefit of knowing what to expect, and the opportunity to hash out questions, concerns or fears they may be having about the process, *before it even begins*.

Remember too that **puberty is not something that plays out over night** - or even within the course of a few months or years. It's a process of change occurring over a period of perhaps five years or more, with the preliminaries beginning as early as age 8 for girls, and age 10 for boys. So surely you can start discussing this issue in a positive, reassuring, and age appropriate way... even with your 3rd grader.

At this stage, the bottom line for children is appreciating that *each person develops at his/her own*

rate - all of which is perfectly normal for the individual. Children who have not been offered this basic information can spend years worrying that "there's something wrong with me." As a parent, you're in a great position to help your child avoid that kind of anxiety.

Consider too, the importance of helping children understand development in *both* sexes. After all, where is it written that only girls need to know about menstruation, or only boys are privileged to hear about wet dreams?! **Since males and females interact with each other throughout the course of their lifetimes, it makes perfectly good sense that they appreciate how each other's body works.**

Since the 3rd grader may be very modest - perhaps even painfully shy about his/her body, there can be some reluctance to talk about this issue. A gentle way to encourage the communication might include digging out pictures of your youngster at various ages, from birth to present day. Comment enthusiastically about "how much you've grown and developed over the last 9 years!" Explain that there are many changes yet to come - changes which, if anticipated and understood, can be an exciting, positive experience.

Parents further facilitate the discussion by sharing what it was like for *them* - *their* feelings, thoughts, and experiences during the early years of puberty. Besides building trust and intimacy, this sharing can be a source of great relief to the child who suddenly realizes "I'm not the only one who's ever felt this way!"

Puberty can be wonderful, exciting, painful, and scary - *all at the same time!* It is the wise and thoughtful parent who assists his child - well ahead of time - in preparing for the journey.

HELPFUL RESOURCES:

The What's Happening to My Body? Book for Boys Lynda Madaras

Lynda Madaras' Growing Up Guide for Girls Lynda Madaras
It's Perfectly Normal: Growing Up. Changing Bodies, Sex and Sexual Health Robie Harris

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 3 - No. 5

Decisions ... Decisions ...

Remember that sexuality education involves far more than just teaching sexual specifics. In addition to information, children need to learn skills which will assist them in appreciating and handling this aspect of life.

A skill of major importance is decision-making... something one doesn't learn to be good at overnight. Your 3rd grader has made a number of decisions up to this point: who to be buddies with at school, what games s/he prefers to play, what books to select from the library, etc. *Often, the choices are impulsive and readily influenced by others who have some clout.*

As s/he matures, life issues become more complex, decisions more involved, and outside influences more intense. The wise parent will consciously assist his child in preparing for the challenge.

Young people develop a sense of competence - and confidence - when allowed to make their own decisions. Give your child the opportunity to do so. Certainly a 3rd grader can choose what to wear to school, what to buy with the birthday money grandma sent, or where the family might go for a Saturday outing.

You can assist your child in learning the art of decision-making:

- Help your child **gather information and weigh options** when making a decision. Help him/her **consider possible outcomes of each option.**

- Help your child understand that decisions have **consequences.** Play "what if..." "What if you chose not to study for your math test?" "What if you go out for gymnastics instead of basketball?" "What if a friend talked you into stealing gum from the store?"

- Be accepting of your child's decisions** - as long as they are not harmful. Understand that s/he makes choices based on personal preference and taste. The decision may not be what you would have selected.

- Set limits** for decision-making. If your child decides on something clearly inappropriate or dangerous, explain why you cannot accept that choice.

The ability to make good decisions is a skill that must be learned. Children who are encouraged and guided in acquiring this skill are well on their way to developing and accepting responsibility.

In the adolescent years to come, your child will be faced with a myriad of choices about which s/he will need to make decisions. One of these areas, sexual decisionmaking, is especially critical.

Much attention has been paid to the connection between self-esteem, decision-making ability, and adolescent sexual behavior. **Evidence supports the notion that young people who feel good about themselves, and who have the skills and knowledge to make healthy choices, are more likely to do just that.** This applies to sexuality as well as other aspects of their lives.

It may be tempting to assume that "it will be a long time before my youngster has to worry about *those kinds of decisions.*" But keep in mind that media/peer influence and pressure hits hard - and early - these days. In any case, the skill of decisionmaking takes time to nurture and refine. It also takes practice. Help your child practice *now* - when the issues are not so vital. Begin *now*, and your child will be well prepared when the time comes for "*those kinds of decisions.*"

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 4 - No. 1

Talk to Me - Please!

You're not the only one who's been noticing your 4th grader's growth and development. S/he has too - often with more concern and embarrassment than pleasure. In fact, there have been quite a few experiences lately that are ... well ... just different. Like ... attraction to peers in more than just a friendship way; and classroom teasing about boyfriends and girlfriends. Things are definitely changing. *And s/he's not at all sure how s/he feels about it.*

While exciting, the "newness" is also scary. Yet **this is a time of such privacy and shyness about change that children often hold their fears of "Is this normal?" and "Am I normal?" deep within.**

Your 4th grader is conscious of the impending onset of puberty (that's right, mom and dad ... it won't be long now!). Whether s/he's started to develop yet or not, it's likely s/he has friends or classmates who have. In fact, *girls may begin developing as early as grade 3 or 4; boys usually a few years later.*

In any case, parents need to anticipate this, and prepare their children *in advance*. This helps ease the countless anxieties and

questions which are certainly there - although often unspoken.

If your family has a history of open, honest communication about sexual issues, your child may likely check in with you about these anxieties and questions. If not, well ... don't worry. It's not too late. *But do begin now.* Already your child has gathered a wealth of sexual information (and misinformation) from a number of other sources: friends, TV, music, the Internet, magazines... you want to get your 2¢ worth in.

The approach to puberty offers an ideal opportunity for discussion ... but don't limit the topic to physical growth and development. Children want - and need - to hear their parents' thoughts, feelings, and values around a variety of sexual issues. They want - and need - factual information, reassurance, guidance, and support. If you find it difficult or awkward to initiate such discussions, here are a few tips to assist you:

- Let your child in on how it was for you as a 4th grader. Share feelings, concerns, and experiences you remember having while growing up.

- Take advantage of the useful publications available for pre-adolescents. Leave them on the coffee table, in the family room,

or somewhere your 4th grader is likely to stumble upon them.

- Use TV, movies, and other media to begin a discussion about sexuality. Let your children know how you feel about sexual messages delivered by the media. Ask about their impressions.

- Call attention to newspaper articles dealing with issues linked to sexuality: HIV/AIDS, rape, infertility treatment, teen pregnancy, sexual abuse ... these are but a few topics noted daily in the headlines.

Open family communication about sex does far more than just ease the journey through the growing up years. It allows for the *sharing* of family values; the *provision* of accurate - and valuable - information; the *promotion* of a positive, respectful attitude toward sexuality; the *alleviation* of fears and anxieties; the *building* of trust, understanding, and support.

If you've already established these lines of communication within your family, great! Keep up the good work! If not, begin today. You and your child have everything to gain.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 4 - No. 2

What's Happening to Me?

Puberty isn't the *only* sexual topic that bears discussing with your 4th grader, but it's likely to be uppermost in *his/her* mind. Even under the best of circumstances, this time of great change for youth may occasionally be confusing and scary. Advanced preparation for puberty is likely to result in a more positive view of the process.

Menstruation and first ejaculation are often seen as landmarks which signal "puberty has arrived." In reality, *puberty is a stage of life marked by a series of events - a process that unfolds over the course of several years.* Menstruation and first ejaculation actually occur fairly late in the process. Yet for some reason, they're seen as "highlights" - perhaps because they're such obvious signs of growing up.

At any rate, *helping your child understand the time frame of puberty can serve to alleviate classic fears* like, "Why am I growing so much faster than my friends?" "How come my friends are growing and I'm not?" When will I get 'it'?" "What's *wrong* with me?" "Am I *normal*?"

Children who have had little explanation of developmental differences can become obsessed

with these concerns - anxiously worrying. Surely you know what that's like from your own perils of puberty. Do you recall thinking years later, "If only someone had explained what was going on with me. I could have coped much better!" As a parent, you can be that "someone" for your own child.

Since we tend to assume that children know far more about their bodies than they actually do, a good rule is to *explain everything* ... even that which seems most obvious. In this way, you're likely to cover many of the unspoken concerns and questions.

At 4th grade (which is still early in the puberty game for the majority of kids), *one of the most useful pieces of information you can share with your child is a rundown of the puberty chain of events.* While it's true that children will begin developing at different times, the *sequence of events is fairly predictable.* Learning about this is far more helpful to a youngster than merely having mom and dad say, "Don't worry, honey. You'll grow."

General order for girls:

1. Breast budding (between ages 8 and 13, on average)
2. Hips broaden
3. Straight pubic hair
4. Growth spurt
5. Pubic hair becomes kinky

6. Menstruation (2 yrs. after start of breast development)
7. Underarm hair

General order for boys:

1. Growth of testes and scrotum (between 10 and 13 ½, on average)
2. Straight pubic hair
3. Early voice change
4. First ejaculation (about 1 year after testicular growth)
5. Pubic hair becomes kinky
6. Growth spurt
7. Underarm hair
8. Significant voice change
9. Beard develops

Of course, puberty consists of more than just physical change. *Emerging sexual feelings, emotions, relationships, stresses* all are parts of the metamorphosis. Children often feel ambivalent about growing up, and need reassurance that such feelings are perfectly normal.

The journey through puberty will never be a piece of cake. But parents can do much to alleviate some of the strangeness and fear. One of the most useful ways is to *communicate.* Talk with your child now about these issues - even if you think it's a little early yet.

Chances are **it's later than you think.**

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 4 - No. 3

Talking With Children About AIDS: What They Need to Know... NOW!

You never thought you would have to talk with your children in such explicit terms. But at this time, no vaccine or medicine can prevent HIV infection or cure AIDS. The only protection you can offer your child is education. Surely you want to offer that.

You know that your 4th grader has heard a lot about AIDS - whether *you've* told him or not. There are a lot of advantages to having *you* tell him. **From the kids at school, he hears rumors, speculation. From you, he can hear the facts.** You're in a position to provide those facts in a gentle, non-threatening way... in a way that will enlighten and empower, rather than frighten him. **Along with information, you will share family values - something he won't be getting elsewhere.**

Certainly by 4th grade, children should understand that AIDS is a serious disease which is caused by a virus spread from person to person. They should be reassured that **people do not become infected through casual contact** (hugging, sharing food, sitting next to an HIV+ person); rather the virus must be introduced into

a person's *bloodstream* in order to cause infection.

During the pre-teen years (9-12), be prepared to offer your child more detailed information about HIV transmission and prevention. At this age, children need to know that:

- HIV can be transmitted while sharing needles with an infected person. These include needles used to inject drugs, steroids or vitamins. Razors and other sharp instruments should not be shared either. Children should be warned about piercing one another's ears, tattooing, and "blood brother or blood sister" rituals.

- HIV can be found in body fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal secretions and breast milk; it can **spread during unprotected vaginal, anal and oral intercourse with an infected person;** an HIV+ mother can transmit HIV to the fetus during pregnancy and/or birth. She can also transmit HIV to her baby through breastfeeding.

- People can protect themselves by **not having sex, and not sharing needles.**

- Latex condoms** reduce the risk of HIV infection for people who have sexual intercourse.

Granted, it's difficult to discuss these issues. But when a child's education about AIDS is left to

hearsay, s/he winds up with an incomplete, often inaccurate picture. The result is needless worry and confusion. Such a child may fear for the health and safety of his friends, his family, and himself.

Basic education can help prevent that needless worry and confusion. And when parents are the source of that basic education, they have an ideal opportunity to pass along important values to the children they love.

Where to Turn?

Perhaps you're feeling a bit overwhelmed. There's so much sexuality information to share with your child...maybe you're not even sure of all the facts yourself!

Not to worry. There are many excellent books and pamphlets which can help you with information, strategies, etc. Here are the titles of a few that are particularly helpful:

How to Talk to Your Child About AIDS SIECUS and New York University

Let's Talk About S-E-X - A Read - and - Discuss Guide for People 9 - 12 and Their Parents
Sam Gitchel & Lorri Foster

Sex Stuff for Kids 7-17 Carole Marsh

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 4 - No. 4

Family Affair

Where is it written that the children's sex education is *mom's* job? Or that *dad* should talk to the boys and *mom* to the girls? Open communication about sexuality is the *family's job*, and the more everyone gets involved, the more balanced and effective it can be.

In addition to information and family values, parents offer their *personal perspectives*, as male or female. It's important and useful for dads to share this with their daughters and moms with their sons.

Children will be relating to males and females throughout their lifetimes and need to understand about each other. For example, boys deserve know about female anatomy and physiology. They can learn an appreciation of the female perspective. Girls deserve an understanding and appreciation of males. *Who better to offer that education than the other gender parent?*

This isn't to suggest we discontinue "father/son" and "mother/daughter" talks. On the contrary. These are special times shared between parent and child. Also realize dad, that you're a valuable resource, with much to contribute toward your daughter's sexuality education - just as you do mom,

and lack of connection for toward your son's. So *let's make sex education a family affair.*

That Special Touch

Development occurring in middle childhood can bring anxiety and awkwardness for parents and children alike. Feeling unsure, parents may begin backing off on the physical touch and affection they freely gave before. That can be especially devastating to a child.

This is a time when children are preoccupied - almost *obsessed* with being normal; bodies experience furious changes in size and shape; emotions and moods can skyrocket, then plummet - all in the course of a few hours. *This is a time when kids need that support and reassurance, that physical touch and affection which says, "you're OK."*

Imagine how it feels when that's no longer forthcoming from mom and dad.

Whether it's the deeply ingrained incest taboo, or just a misconception that the kids aren't interested anymore, parents - and especially other gender parents - frequently operate by a "hands off" policy at this stage of their child's life. The result can be loneliness, confu-

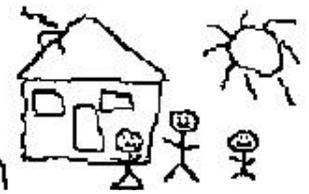
sion, and a lack of connection for youth.

As children mature, they initiate their own "hands off" policy. It's somewhat erratic and unpredictable. On one hand, they may show obvious distaste for parental displays of affection, flinching whenever mom and dad attempt to bestow a hug or kiss (especially if anyone else is around!). On the other hand, there are times when kids *ache* for a warm touch - but don't - or *won't* - ask. (Parents are just expected to sense this, and respond appropriately.)

At any rate, children need their parents - **BOTH** parents - to continue *offering*, but not *forcing*, physical affection. (and will need this - whether they're 2 or 42!) Let them know you still enjoy giving (and getting) hugs and kisses - and that you respect their right to accept, to refuse - and to change their minds!

Talk with your children about your own uncertainty or discomfort. Encourage them to air their feelings. Decide together how to handle this "touchy" issue. Rather than automatically assume what the kids want and when - **ASK THEM!**

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 4 - No. 5

Dealing With Peer Pressure

It's been apparent for some time now that the influence you have over your 4th grader is waning a bit. Let's face it, mom and dad, *as far as your child's concerned, when it comes to certain issues, friends have more clout.*

Just because you know full well that this is a sign of normal, healthy development, doesn't mean you have to *like* it. **At this age, kids are increasing their separation from the folks, testing their wings, and becoming more independent.** Scary, isn't it?

The world is a far different place than when *you* were 10. Today, **4th graders experience pressures that you didn't confront until high school - even college!** Drugs, alcohol, sex, violence... elementary school students are grappling with *adult issues and decisions!*

It's not enough to tell your child, "Don't!" **The need to belong and to be accepted by the peer group can be powerful enough to make kids break the rules.** But it is helpful to your 4th grader when you:

- **Acknowledge** how tough it can be to go against the group.

- **Assist** him in recognizing what peer pressure looks like - the subtle and blatant forms.

- **Share** your experiences with peer pressure. Explain how you dealt with the situations. (Share your failures as well as your successes!)

- **Practice** "what if." Help her analyze consequences of various choices; brainstorm ways to respond - what could be said and done.

- **Encourage** him to come to you if he feels pressured and unsure of what to do. Offer to be his "out," his "excuse" if he needs one. Often, kids look to parents to say "No" in order to get them off the hook with their friends.

- **Reassure** her that even if she gets into trouble, you will always be there. You may be upset, and you may even yell, but you will always be there for her.

Peer pressure isn't just a childhood dilemma. It affects young and old alike. Skills you teach your child *now* will serve him throughout his life.

Before You Jump to Any Conclusions...

Wait a minute. You understood it when your child "played doctor" in pre-school. But this is 4th grade! What's going on here!?

What's going on here is not exactly "playing doctor," but it's the 4th grader's version of checking out what bodies look like - AND - whether his looks like it should.

You see, **it's common at this age (although not widely discussed) for same-sex friends to examine each other's bodies. It's all part of a child's natural curiosity, and the need to confirm that his physical development is OK.**

This shouldn't be interpreted as "my son or daughter must be gay." Both gay and straight youth engage in same-sex exploration. It's important for both families and young people to know that automatic assumptions about sexual orientation should not be made based upon this.

You may want to refer back to this newsletter's issue, Grade 4 #2, which deals with the sequence of changes that occur during puberty. Take the time to share this information with your child so s/he can feel more comfortable and confident about growth and development.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 5 - No. 1

What I Want to Know Is ...

Why does getting married cause babies? Can boys have periods? Can you get pregnant before you have periods? Do guys get sterile from using all their sperm? What are birth control pills? How does sex give you AIDS? What's a wet dream?

These questions were asked by an average group of 5th graders during a sex education class. Some questions may surprise you, appearing rather simplistic. You're thinking, "Surely 5th graders know *that!*" Others shock you. "I can't believe they asked *that* - in 5th grade?!"

You'd be amazed at how much 5th graders have heard about sex, and how little they really know. It can put parents in an awkward position. On one hand, they frequently assume (incorrectly) that children understand far more than they actually do. Consequently, many overlook the sexuality basics, neglecting to pass them on to their children. On the other hand, mom and dad may hold back on more explicit sexual issues, assuming (again incorrectly) that "5th graders don't need to know such things."

The reality is, children are bombarded with sexual messages from friends, TV, movies, songs,

the Internet. Many messages are inaccurate, perhaps irresponsible, even exploitive; a few may be factual; *typically none contain the values you want your child to learn.* Is it any wonder 10-year-olds ask sexually simplistic AND explicit questions?

The best way to ensure that your child receives accurate, value based sexuality education is for *you* to be the primary provider. This is not to suggest that sex education doesn't belong in schools. On the contrary, many excellent school-based programs exist (and for some students, these programs are their *only* source of factual information). But these programs need to be viewed *in conjunction with, not in place of,* parent-child communication about sex. A home/school partnership is ideal.

Don't be discouraged if you've had little open discussion about sex with your child. It's never too late to begin. Perhaps your reluctance was due to embarrassment, uncertainty, fear, or maybe you were simply unaware of the need.

Whatever the reason, you might begin by acknowledging that to your child... something like, "you know, sexuality has always been a hard subject for me to talk about. I do think it's important and want to answer your questions, to listen

to your concerns and views. I also want to share with you my values around sexuality."

You needn't hold a formal session. In fact, the more informal, the better - you'll both feel more comfortable. Take advantage of naturally occurring "teachable moments" - a magazine article about teenage pregnancy, a news report on HIV/AIDS, a local program on sexual abuse. These are wonderful discussion starters. If your child has not begun experiencing the changes of puberty, surely some of her friends have. This is a perfect issue to address with 5th graders, since typically they have many questions and fears about it.

There are all kinds of opportunities and sexually related topics, if only you're open to them. And remember to address those issues you assumed were too advanced. As witnessed by the sampling of questions, children have bits and pieces of hearsay, a lot of confusion, and an abundance of curiosity about sex. A good rule is to explain what you think they want to know - and more.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 5 - No. 2

Trying Time

If puberty is someone's idea of a joke, nobody's laughing. To say that this can be a difficult stage for child AND parent is clearly an understatement.

For children, puberty is the time of life when they typically: hate their bodies, no matter *what* the dimensions; feel weird, and can't figure out why; "*know*" they're not normal; don't want to grow up or be treated like kids; and quarrel a lot with parents who "*just don't understand!*"

For parents, puberty is the time when they typically: don't know what's gotten into their kids; feel awkward, excited, and nervous about their child's changing body; "*can't do anything right!*"; long for the days when they and their youngster could communicate - *without* yelling; panic at the pressures facing youth these days.

Science hasn't yet discovered how one can *avoid* puberty. But, with good preparation - knowledge, skills, and a good attitude the journey can be rather exciting ... or at least a bit more pleasant ... OK - let's just say *tolerable*.

Perhaps during no other phase of life do people undergo such physical and emotional transformation. While excited at the

prospect of growing up, many kids (and parents) feel, "I'm not sure I'm ready for this."

Let your child know that such ambivalence is common. Encourage him/her to talk about feelings s/he has toward growing and changing; what s/he's looking forward to, or is concerned about.

Share *your* stories about puberty. Kids love being in on their parent's lives. It builds trust and reassures children that the folks appreciate what they're going through.

Your 5th grader needs solid information about developmental changes that occur in *both* sexes during puberty. Knowing this *well in advance* can lessen anxiety. Children should be reassured that each person has his/her own timeclock. The body develops *when it's ready*...some begin early, others later. Even if they're not satisfied with their personal development schedules, children are relieved to hear they're normal.

If your child is embarrassed or genuinely uncomfortable discussing these issues, acknowledge this. You could say, "A lot of people are embarrassed to talk about these things. If you're feeling that way, I understand. I'm

feeling a bit awkward too. Maybe we can help each other."

If s/he's reluctant to talk, don't force it. You might comment, "I can see this is hard for you to talk about now. Is there something I could do to help? Would you like to try again another time?"

Know too, there are many ways to impart this information to your child. **Take advantage of the excellent books written specifically for youth.** Leave them around the house where your child is sure to find them. (You read them too. Remember what it's like to have puberty strike. Such a refresher can provide you with facts you've long since forgotten... or perhaps never knew!) At a later point, offer to discuss the books with your child.

Above all, be persistent in being there and willing to talk. Don't be pushy, or make a big deal of it... simply seize opportunities which allow the topic of sexuality to come up.

Puberty consists of a series of events which unfold over the course of 4-5 years. Why not do all you can to ease the transition through those years? Your child will not be the only one who benefits!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 5 - No. 3

A Check List

It's a good time to assess exactly what your 5th grader knows (or not) about sexuality. Inventory what's important to understand by this age, and catch up on items which haven't yet been addressed.

By 5th grade, children should have knowledge around anatomy and changes during puberty (for both sexes), reproduction and birth. Hopefully you have talked about HIV/AIDS, sexual orientation, masturbation, and premarital sex - and shared your related values. Have you talked about exploitation and date rape? What about sex role stereotyping, relationships, and decision-making?

This is by no means an exhaustive list. It's merely a reminder of the knowledge that becomes even more critical at this age for your child now.

If you're looking at this list thinking, "We haven't covered *half* of this!", don't panic. But do get moving! The 11-year-old needs solid information - often on issues which parents assume are "too advanced."

You may find the following resources especially helpful:

How to Talk to Your Child About Sexuality

Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Let's Talk About S-E-X Sam Gitchel and Lorri Foster

Talking With Your Child About Sex

Drs. Mary S. Calderone and James W. Ramey
Beyond the Birds and the Bees Beverly Engel, MA, MFCC

Urges and Surges

The physical and emotional changes which occur in children during puberty are plainly evident to their parents. But the accompanying transformation in sexual feelings, urges, and fantasies are not so obvious - in fact, they are typically kept hidden.

Without a chance to hear that it's perfectly normal for sexual feelings and urges to intensify, and for fantasies to become more frequent during puberty, children may find themselves a bit shaken ("Is this *supposed* to happen?").

It's also during this stage that masturbation is usually rediscovered (if it had ever been forgotten), along with any guilt or anxiety which may have been previously attached to it. Rarely asked questions about whether masturbation is good/bad often plague children.

Give children reassurance that the hormonal changes of puberty

can result in new and intense sexual feelings. This is normal and all part of the wonder and excitement of growing up!

Deliver the family's party line on masturbation. If you believe it's acceptable, healthy exploration, say so! If not, explain that without causing your child guilt or shame.

If you've not built a foundation upon which to discuss some of these emotionally charged issues, it makes it tougher ... *but not impossible.*

Possible icebreakers:

- I remember being 11, experiencing a lot of new feelings and urges. I wasn't quite sure what to make of them. I know a lot of my 11-year-old friends felt the same way, but unfortunately, no one ever talked about it.

- When I was in 5th grade, I was madly in love with a 7th grade boy. I got chills just looking at him. Have you ever had a crush like that?

- When I was your age, I felt uncomfortable talking with my folks about sex, but I had lots of questions. How can I help you feel comfortable talking with me about these issues?

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 5 - No. 4

Facts vs. Fears

Around 5th grade, young people begin wondering (perhaps *worrying*) about sexual orientation: How can you tell if you're gay or lesbian? What *causes* it? Does masturbating mean you're gay? Are lesbian and gay people normal?

When you think about it, at this age, these questions are not at all surprising. Puberty is the time when children are at the height of growth, change, AND worry! **The events of puberty can arouse anxieties, uncertainty, and confusion as perhaps no other stage of life can.** It seems the overwhelming fear is that of being different from their peers.

As part of all this, concern about sexual orientation may begin to sprout. There's a lot of fuel for the fire: same-gender play is common, with friends checking each other out, partly in an effort to validate their own development; sexual fantasies may include same-gender friends; young people frequently develop crushes on same-gender teachers, coaches, etc. Add to all this, the pervasive assumptions about HIV/AIDS and the gay community, along with the common derogatory schoolyard remarks about people who are gay and lesbian.

Top it off with a lack of understanding or someone to even talk to about these things, and you've likely got a confused kid on your hands.

Whether your child has asked you about sexual orientation or not, now is a good time to address it. There are many lead-ins to the subject, including TV shows, news reports, or a negative term overheard in reference to people who are gay or lesbian.

You can help your child by pointing out some of the common misconceptions. From what we now know:

- People do not choose their sexual orientation.
- No one can *cause* another person to be gay, lesbian or heterosexual.
- Being gay is not a sickness or mental illness.
- Being gay or lesbian is not something that can or needs to be "cured."

Encourage your child to express his feelings. Ask what he's heard from the kids at school. This may allow him to discuss some of the anxieties he has about his own sexual development. In addition to reassurance, you can offer your personal values and perspectives around sexual orientation. Be

prepared to answer the question: Is it bad to be gay?

Explain that people have different opinions about sexual orientation. Then specify yours. While sharing your beliefs, be sure to emphasize that it is never OK to discriminate against someone because of sexual orientation. Point out that words like "fag" and "queer" are offensive and meant to hurt. These terms are used in anger or to ridicule.

Be sure to acknowledge that gay and lesbian couples have loving relationships that are as wonderful and important to them as any other couple's relationship is to them. **Let your child know that you would love and support him, no matter what his own sexual orientation might be.**

Once again, you're faced with a difficult subject that needs to be discussed - for *everyone's* sake. It's an issue that evokes a lot of emotion, judgments, values - as well as a hefty dose of misunderstanding... which is exactly why many parents choose to avoid the subject.

Please don't be one of those parents.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 5 - No. 5

Tell Me I'm OK

Many 5th graders are anxious about the rapid changes they're experiencing, both physically and emotionally; they're worried about their bodies: *am I too short? too tall? Why am I so flat chested? When will my penis grow? I hate my nose!*

They feel uncoordinated as arms and legs grow, completely out of sync with one another; their moods are erratic, for no apparent reason. Of course, it wouldn't be cool to ask anybody about this stuff, so they frequently just suffer in silence. *No wonder self-esteem can take a nosedive during puberty!*

Self-esteem is something which parents have nurtured (or not) in their child since birth. In fact, it's during the very early years that children develop a sense of their OK-ness. For example: If they're angry about his behavior, mom and dad reassure Jay they still love *him* - this promotes a positive sense of self; Lisa is encouraged to attempt new skills, to stretch her abilities, and then is praised for the trying - this promotes self-esteem; David is reminded that his differences from others (whether physical, intellectual ... whatever) make him the unique and special person he is - that builds self-concept.

At this stage, parents would do well to be especially aware of their children's need for encouragement and support. Young people have a difficult lesson to learn: self-esteem is not and cannot be based upon what others think of them. The bottom line is how a person feels about himself. As one father told his daughter: "Annie, not everyone is going to like you. And that's ok. What counts is that you like yourself." That's a difficult concept for adults to accept, much less children!

As parents, we can offer our children encouragement, understanding, trust, praise, and appreciation. We can help them feel successful, acknowledging their successes, and teaching them to learn from the failures.

Along with this, we can provide complete and accurate information about growth and development about the physical, emotional, and sexual issues which are all part of puberty. *With factual background, the unknown becomes less scary, less likely to cause confusion and worry which so often threaten self-esteem.*

Research tells us that the **sexual decisions and behaviors of adolescents are greatly influenced by self-esteem.** High self-esteem

correlates with more positive, healthy, and responsible choices.

Young people sometimes operate under the illusion that a sexual relationship proves they are loved, worthy, etc. They may agree to or even seek out sexual activity in a misguided effort to prove their self-worth. Yet *premature sexual activity can leave young people hurt, confused, guilty, scared - perhaps even pregnant or infected with a sexually transmitted infection.* Needless to say, the ultimate outcome can sometimes be the further erosion of self-esteem.

We owe it to young people to discuss these issues with them in depth; to share our perspective about the place of sexuality in one's life; to answer their questions; to listen to their thoughts, opinions, and concerns. Rather than assume that your 5th grader has plenty of time for such discussion, realize that children are growing up much faster these days. We must prepare them to grow up safely - informed and self-assured.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 6 - No. 1

This Too Shall Pass

You don't get it. You pride yourself on the relative ease with which you've discussed sexual issues with your child in the past: answering questions honestly; initiating conversation; creating an environment in which sexuality is viewed as a special and positive aspect of ourselves.

What happened? Suddenly, your 6th grader has decided the topic is off limits. S/he's appalled (embarrassed, disgusted, nervous ... take your pick...) whenever the subject comes up. That's just what you've been trying to prevent... why you've worked so hard to communicate. And it's come to this? So you wonder, "What did I do wrong?"

Nothing. You have a typical 6th grader. As 6th graders go, sex is gross, embarrassing, stupid, funny, or all of the above. B.P. (Before Puberty), things were different: sexuality was neat to talk about with the folks; the issues were matter of fact, non-threatening, and your child was an interested bystander.

D.P. (During Puberty), sexuality becomes terribly personal! Bodies blossom, fantasies and strange new urges arise; simmering concerns about what's normal result in considerable uneasiness; many

6th graders know of someone - a friend or classmate - who is actually experimenting with sexual activity (Yes! Unfortunately some children become involved very early!) *Suddenly, sexuality is hitting too close to home, it's scary...and "I'd rather not talk about it!"*

Such is a typical 11-year-old's response to the topic of sex. It's now especially important that parents muster patience, understanding, and support in order to teach children what they need to know:

- **Continue** broaching the subject - keep it light, don't push. Settle for a monologue if need be...at least it's putting out your message.

- **Avoid** preaching. As sex becomes more of a real issue in a child's life, it's easy for parents to fall into the lecture mode. "Do this... don't do that" is likely to fall on deaf ears - spurring even more resistance to discussion. When parents *truly listen* to their children, encouraging them to express personal views, communication is enhanced.

- **Encourage** your child to examine, clarify, and discuss his own values about sexual issues. Parents hope the family values will be accepted. Be prepared to hear

that some of your child's views differ from yours. *Make it safe for him to disagree; help him know your love and support is not contingent on his acceptance of your views.*

- **Acknowledge** your child's reactions...something like: "You look uncomfortable talking about this. How can we make it easier?" or "When I was young, I was so confused about sex that I had a hard time asking questions. Is that how you feel?"

- **Acknowledge** your own feelings, for example: "I'm frustrated that you seem to be tuning me out. I'd like to be able to talk about this *together*."

- **Invest** in some of the wonderful sexuality books written for young people. Leave them in an obvious place.

- **Keep** your sense of humor... and use it. This needn't be a heavy subject. Take comfort knowing that your child is moving toward A.P. (After Puberty).

Give yourself a break. Your influence on your child is a powerful one...and only one of many. Remember, you can take neither credit nor blame for the ultimate outcome. *You can only give it your best effort.*

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 6 - No. 2

The Times They Are A Changin'

Over the last several decades, our society has undergone vast changes in sexual attitudes and behaviors, leaving today's youth - and their parents - facing difficult and complex issues. Sexually explicit messages permeate our lives. The impact is especially powerful on young people who lack the maturity, wisdom, and insight through which to filter the messages.

Coupled with inadequate knowledge and understanding about sexuality, the result can be significant: vulnerable youth at risk of premature sex, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, sexual abuse, and exploitation.

Consider this:

- There are over 1 million teenage pregnancies each year in the U.S.; 84% are unintended.
- 8 out of 10 boys and 7 out of 10 girls aged 15-17 have had sexual intercourse.
- 1 out of 6 teenagers contracts a sexually transmitted infection.
- The U.S. has one of the highest teenage pregnancy, birth, and abortion rates in the developed world.

Research consistently shows that open, honest family communica-

tion about sex can reduce the risk of a child becoming one of the statistics. What better way to ward off the tragedies of sexual ignorance than to take preventive measures early on ... such as ... education.

Most parents recognize the importance of sexuality education, and in fact, are eager to provide it. Yet many are not prepared for the *depth* of information and skills that is important during the middle childhood years. It's time for more advanced discussion: sexual relationships, birth control and sexual protection, sexually transmitted infections, teenage pregnancy, etc.

Some parents fear that addressing such issues will condone, encourage, or promote sexual activity... put ideas into the kids' heads. Not so. Surveys of young people clearly demonstrate the ideas are already there! All the more reason for mom and dad to initiate discussion, provide information, and share values. In fact, some studies show that children raised in families with open, honest communication about sexual issues are more likely to delay first intercourse and, if they do become involved in a sexual relationship, they are more likely to protect themselves. When parents withhold information about sex - particularly issues such as birth con-

trol, sexual protection, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS - their children's vulnerability and risk increase.

What this ultimately boils down to is the first basic rule of sexuality education: Teach them what you think they need to know... and more.

For the majority of 12-year-olds, these more advanced sexual issues can still be addressed at a fairly non-threatening, non-emotional level, since most young people this age are not yet personally involved. This is not likely to be the case a few years down the road. And once the issues become more pertinent in their lives, the discussion becomes controversial... more difficult. Which brings us to the second basic rule of sex education:

The best time to talk is now.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 6 - No. 3

Ritchie & Karen

You're likely to have a few ideas about when your child will be old enough for a boyfriend/girlfriend. Your child is likely to have some ideas about that too - perhaps vastly different from yours.

It's an old parent lament: kids are pressured to grow up too fast these days. Well, merely bemoaning that fact will do little to help them deal more effectively with the situation. Absolutely forbidding children to be swayed by such pressure isn't very useful either.

No one is suggesting that children be encouraged into social situations prematurely. But realize that elementary school children, some as early as 4th or 5th grade, play with the concept of relationships ... boyfriend/girlfriend, etc... some more seriously than others. And be sensitive too that these interests and attractions may not all be toward the other gender.

There's the usual scribbling of hearts and initials on notebooks, phone calls and passing love notes. Unfortunately, some 6th graders (more typically 6th grade girls with older boys) get more involved in various levels of sexual experimentation ... a rather sobering thought. It isn't too early to talk about feelings (and pres-

ures) that often accompany interest in romantic relationships. This is another example of addressing an issue *before* (hopefully) it *becomes* an issue! It's a chance to talk about friendship and about relating to both the other and same gender comfortably, respectfully. You can help prepare your youngster for the fun and excitement of such relationships, as well as for the frustrations, uncertainty, and disappointments that sometimes result.

Establishing supportive and loving relationships is not something people automatically know how to do, intuitively. There are skills involved - skills which can be taught and nurtured throughout childhood. But young people are less likely to look to their parents for assistance with these skills if they fear being teased, not taken seriously, or met with "You're too young to be interested in boys/girls."

Surely we don't want our children to learn about relationships from the media (with its unrealistic, romanticized portrayal of the "ideal" couple), or from trial and error. We'd rather they feel free to bring their feelings and questions to mom and dad.

The importance of talking with your child about social relationships - ahead of time - cannot be

overemphasized. Just as different children experience vastly different rates of physical development, so too with social development. This can result in worry... "All my friends talk about boys constantly, but I'm just not interested. What's wrong with me?"; embarrassment... "My folks tease me whenever girls call the house. I hate it!"; pressure... "I've got to have a girlfriend/boyfriend because everybody in my class does."; confusion... "I'm a girl, and I like other girls!"

Concerns about being popular, dressing right, looking good, fitting in - these are major issues for 6th graders! By talking about this, parents give children a chance to vent their feelings. It may take a bit of encouragement. After all, many children (and parents) are reluctant to talk about such personal things.

Kids need help negotiating the complexities of relating. Without it, they may stumble through... some with more difficulty than others.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 6 - No. 4

The Media ... The Message

- Surveys indicate that many teens believe TV offers realistic sexual messages.
- By age 18, the average student has spent 11,000 hours in school, compared to over 15,000 hours watching TV.
- Young people cite the media as one of their major sources of messages about sex.

And we wonder why we have problems? We're far beyond the days of "Ozzie and Harriet," where any bedroom scene consisted of twin beds, lights on, feet on the floor. T.V. has crossed the threshold: In network shows, explicit physical portrayal of intercourse occurs. Actors may be covered by a sheet, but the activity is unmistakable.

Sexually explicit messages permeate our lives. What's a parent to do? A good first step is *awareness* - recognizing the frequency and impact of these messages.

It also makes sense to monitor films, T.V., radio and web sites our children tune into, realizing *we can never completely isolate them from questionable or offensive messages*. Despite house rules and guidelines, children are often exposed to inappropriate

media without our knowledge or consent.

Help your child develop a filter through which to sort and interpret the messages. Teach him to be a discerning viewer, to *identify* and *evaluate* content. Assist him in *recognizing exploitive, irresponsible, and unrealistic sexual messages*. A good way to do this is to watch movies and TV, surf the net, etc., with your child, and then have a discussion about it.

Encourage your child to express his views (for example: "How do you feel about the way women were portrayed in that movie?" "Why do you suppose advertisers show sexy people to sell their products? What message does that send?" "What do you think about the teenager in that film keeping her baby?") Share *your* thoughts and values too.

We needn't analyze all media to death... just be alert to the messages. It's a good way to temper a powerful influence.

Peer Power

It's important to talk with 6th graders about sexual (mis) information and peer pressure.

A good way to broach the subject

is to share a bit of your own past (which kids love!). "I remember the wild ideas we heard about sex when I was young. Like: you can't get pregnant the first time you have sex; or having sex proves you're grown up. What kinds of things have you heard?"

Impress on your child that when it comes to sexuality, accurate sources are important. Suggest some options: parents, teachers, school nurses, counselors, etc. Realizing they have several alternatives, young people may be less inclined to accept their peers as "sexperts."

Make it safe for your child to discuss sexuality with *you*.

- **Listen** to his concerns, questions, etc., knowing that interest in the subject doesn't mean he's sexually active or considering it.
- **Respect** his right to express views which may differ from yours.
- **Present** facts along with your values, *being careful to differentiate between the two*.
- **Trust** his ability to make good decisions, if given information and taught the skills.

Peer influence isn't confined to sex, OR youth. We contend with it at some level throughout our lives. Your child will benefit from learning how to deal with it *now*.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 6 - No. 5

What Do I Say About ...

When it comes to discussing sexual values with your children, *say what you believe*. It's that simple (or that difficult). Premarital sex. Birth control. Teen pregnancy. Sexual orientation. These are a few of the issues milling about the minds of 6th graders. Provided the opportunity and an atmosphere of trust and safety, young people ask lots of questions about these and other sexual topics.

They're anxious to hear the facts... AND what mom and dad think. Often, mom and dad aren't quite sure *what* to say or *how* to say it. So they may opt to avoid the subject altogether, hoping the kids won't bring it up... which they won't if the impression is that mom and dad would rather not talk about it.

Let's look at some reasons parents are unsure of what to say or how to say it:

•***"I don't want to encourage her."*** A common fear, but listen: your youngster needs no encouragement. She's getting *plenty* from peers, from the media... maybe it's time she heard from *you*.

•***"I don't want to preach."*** Good. Your children don't want that ei-

ther. But expressing your personal beliefs about an issue isn't the same as trying to force someone else to accept them. It's all in the delivery. For example, a parent might say, "I believe teens are too young to have sex. There are good reasons to wait (such as: there's a lot of responsibility and emotional implications which most teens are not ready to accept; they may feel pressured into it, and wind up feeling regretful; the risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections)."

•***"I don't want my son to think that as long as teens use birth control, it's ok for them to have sex."*** Fine. Don't tell him that. Informing youth about birth control is not an open invitation for them to have sex. Parents may fear they are giving a double or contradictory message ("Don't do it... but if you do, use a condom."). Such is not the case if information AND values are shared. The result is a loving, helpful message. For example: "I don't think teenagers should have sex. And, I realize that many do. It's important that they protect themselves from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections."

Could it be that some parents avoid discussing controversial sexual issues for fear their children may not accept their beliefs?

"*Then* what would I do? How would I handle *that*?" It's a tough one, all right... facing the fact that ultimately our children form their own opinions and develop their own value systems – which may or may not be in line with ours.

It's also true that most children eventually adopt many of the family values. Nonetheless, they need the opportunity to examine, question, challenge. Would you rather your child test out ideas and views about sexuality in an arena of open communication with mom and dad - or through experimentation?

Encourage the discussion of sexual issues, remembering to *listen to your child's views* as well as *state your own*. Take on the controversy. ***Say what you believe, taking care to present the facts as well as what you value... while not confusing the two.***

RESOURCES:

Beyond the Birds and Bees
Beverly Engel, M.A., M.F.C.C.

How to Talk to Your Child About Sexuality Planned Parenthood

It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Sex and Sexual Health Robie Harris

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 7 - No. 1

Speak Up!

Remember what the middle school years were like? An emotional roller coaster: hormone madness and changing bodies; a very shaky self-concept; novel interest in the same or other sex - which is exciting, awkward, confusing - all at the same time; a simultaneous *craving for and fear of* new freedom... independence from mom and dad.

Middle school: the wonder years. Young people wonder, "Will I *ever* be normal?" Parents wonder, "Will this *ever* end?"

Clearly, life's a challenge in middle school... for all involved. It's a time when parent/child conversations of any sort can be tough; conversations about sexual issues...*impossible!*

For parents, there's a temptation to shy away from the subject. Old anxieties come back to haunt us. Concerns like: "Maybe all this discussion with children about sex isn't such a good thing. We don't want to *encourage* them... you know, put *ideas* into their heads." Or: "Is it a *mistake* to talk about this so openly with kids? Why not let them stay innocent as long as they can? There's plenty of time for them to learn about all this adult stuff."

Sound familiar? Rest assured, mom and dad, the *very least* of

your worries are the "ideas" you might put into your child's head. The reality is, your 7th grader is exposed to a daily barrage of sexual messages... from peers and the media. The messages are frequently inaccurate, irresponsible, even exploitive!

As parents, you're in an ideal position to clean up sexual "myth-information." The "ideas" you'll be putting into your child's head are about your family values around sexuality; they're about accurate information; respectful, positive attitudes toward sexuality; and about love, trust and support.

But what about the fear that knowledge equals activity - that giving kids information on all this adult stuff might encourage sexual experimentation?

Research indicates that such is not the case. In fact, teens are far more likely to learn by doing when they have been kept ignorant (innocent?); have been given little or no opportunity to talk openly with parents or other trusted adults about sexual issues; and when their sex "education" has been left to peers and the media.

Surely, as a parent you do not want to leave your child's sexual learning to chance. The results of "trial and error" sexuality education are disheartening at best. Of-

ten they are devastating: premature sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections. These are just a few of the consequences of sexual ignorance.

So, mom and dad, put those old anxieties back where they belong - and remember what you already know: your children need and deserve to hear from you about all the issues of importance to their lives... including sexuality.

During the wonder years, kids *and* parents have loads of things they're concerned about, confused by, frightened of. Making it safe for the family to talk about sexuality lightens the load. Difficult? Embarrassing? Awkward? Sure! And well worth the effort.

Stuck for an icebreaker? Try something heartfelt and honest, like, "You know, talking about sex is a little uncomfortable for me. I imagine it's hard for you too. I do think it's important that we talk, so... maybe we can help each other out, ok?"

Broach the subject by using "teachable moments" like a news story on HIV or teen pregnancy. Watch TV. together and discuss the sexual messages you notice. Take any and all opportunities you can, mom and dad, to put *your ideas into your child's head!*

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 7 - No. 2

Puberty 101

Puberty. Almost sounds like a disease. For those experiencing it, it often *feels* like one. Of course, much of that has to do with the incredible physical changes that occur: hormones surging, bodies transforming (usually into sizes and shapes that are NEVER right!).

And let's not overlook (as if we could) the emotional upheaval that accompanies puberty: intense feelings of excitement, anxiety, happiness, anger, sorrow, delight... perhaps all within a matter of hours! Imagine experiencing such major change without understanding - without having a clue that it's all perfectly normal!

You can ease your child's passage through the puberty "weird years." Help equip your son/daughter for the journey - with information, support, and plenty of opportunity to share thoughts, feelings, and questions.

Although they're dying for answers as well as reassurance, many 7th graders are reluctant to approach mom and dad with their concerns. Don't mistake their silence as a sign that they know it all or don't want to talk about it. Sometimes their confusion is so great, they don't even know what to ask or how to begin! Add to that the awkwardness that often

goes along with conversations related to sexuality... and you can appreciate their dilemma.

So, mom and dad, initiate the conversation. Just in case your memories of puberty have mellowed over time, here are some of the more pressing concerns:

I'm the tallest (shortest, skinniest, fattest) kid in the class. I hate it! Will my penis ever grow? Why am I so flat chested? I'm the only girl I know who hasn't gotten 'it' (my period). AM I NORMAL?

Parents can spare their children anxiety by sharing the details of how this puberty business works.

People grow and change at their own rate, whether they like it or not. AND, they begin the process of sexual development at the time that's right for them. Some start early, some late... either way, it's perfectly normal.

Offer your 7th grader a rundown of physical changes to expect during puberty. The entire process takes place over 4-5 years. It's marked by a series of events which occur in a fairly predictable sequence, although some young people follow a slightly different sequence - and that's normal too! Explaining this to your child is far more useful than simply saying, "Don't worry. Your body knows exactly what it's doing."

GENERAL ORDER - GIRLS:

1. Breast budding (between ages 8-13)
2. Hips broaden
3. Straight pubic hair
4. Growth spurt
5. Pubic hair becomes kinky
6. Menstruation (about 2 years after start of breast development)
7. Underarm hair

GENERAL ORDER - BOYS:

1. Growth of testes and scrotum (between ages 10-13.5)
2. Straight pubic hair
3. Early voice change
4. First ejaculation (about 1 year after testicular growth)
5. Pubic hair becomes kinky
6. Growth spurt
7. Underarm hair
8. Significant voice change
9. Beard develops

When children can gauge their own development against this kind of roadmap, they feel more assured that they're on track.

Remember too, that puberty is more than just physical change. Emerging sexual feelings, emotions, relationships, stresses... these are all part of the journey, and can be especially difficult to discuss. Here are some good resources to assist you:

What's Happening to My Body? for

Boys/for Girls L. Madaras

It's Perfectly Normal: Growing Up, Changing Bodies and Sexual Health

Robie Harris

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 7 - No. 3

The Dating Game

"I'm just not interested in having a girlfriend, but that's all my friends talk about! Am I weird or something?"

Middle schools are filled with many who fret, "What's wrong with me!?" if they're not yet interested in the other gender. Media and peer pressure to be involved in early relationships heighten the anxiety.

"I wish I was popular like Karen. All the boys like her." Disappointment, bruised self-esteem, secret fears and hurts rarely expressed to *anyone* - especially parents.

Although your child may not be dating for a while, recognize that many 7th graders sample boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. Help your child understand that people develop social readiness at their own rate. Acknowledge it's often confusing to be surrounded by friends who vary greatly on the readiness scale.

Even if your child hasn't expressed concerns about this, bring it up... just to be sure. Break the ice with your own recollections of 7th grade:

"I remember 7th grade brought lots of worries about dating and relationships. Me? I could have cared less at the time, but I didn't dare admit it. My friends would

never let me live it down! But you know, I bet a lot of them secretly felt the same way I did."

"I wonder too about young people who are attracted to their same gender friends. With all the pressure to have a boyfriend or girlfriend, they must feel pretty isolated and afraid to talk about their feelings."

This kind of conversation is a nice acknowledgement that not all people have romantic feelings for or relationships with someone of the other gender. It opens the door for your child to discuss this with you if they are questioning their own sexuality.

By initiating discussions about these issues, you can help relieve the social pressures your children may be experiencing. Explore feelings and situations that can arise when romantic interests begin to emerge. Even if your child isn't ready (or willing) to talk freely about this, you won't be wasting your time. The message will still be heard: "If you find you're feeling confused about this, please know that I'm here for you. I'll listen, try to understand, and who knows? Maybe I can help."

A Little Help From Friends...

The depth of sexuality education required by 7th graders may be

more than parents realize. One mother commented, "I didn't know half that stuff 'til I was out of college!" Her husband added, "A lot of it I still don't know!"

It's true. Today's adolescents confront sophisticated, complex issues. In trying to provide information and guidance parents often recognize deficiencies in their own sexual knowledge. It's easy to feel overwhelmed about what to say and when to begin...

If you value family communication about sex, if you recognize that complicated issues must be addressed, and if you are committed to working through any discomfort or resistance you and/or your child may feel about discussing these issues, you're well on the way.

Specifics and practical "how to's" of family sex education can be acquired as you go along. There are many resources to assist you. Planned Parenthood is an excellent source for speakers, books and pamphlets. Community schools and colleges may offer parenting classes that address sexuality issues. Physicians, family counselors and members of the clergy often have valuable insights on sex education.

These resources can be a wonderful support... check them out!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 7 - No. 4

Kids Need to Know; Parents Need to Tell Them

“How do you make a baby?” Remember the first time your little one posed THE QUESTION? You recall with amusement (or chagrin!) the impish delight with which s/he repeated (and *repeated*) the question - for all the people in the grocery store to hear! S/he delivered the line with such volume, such clarity... *and* determination!

“How do you make a baby?” A legitimate question, yet one that so frequently catches parents off guard and unprepared. Why? Maybe we just never expected the issue to crop up at such an early age.

That little one is now a 7th grader... perhaps with parents who are still caught off guard and unprepared when it comes to sexuality and youth.

It's easy to understand how this can happen. After all, sexual involvement, unintended pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, birth control... surely we would never expect these issues to crop up at such an early age. Yet they are the very issues parents need to address, especially with their 13- and 14-year-olds.

CONSIDER THIS:

- More than half of all 17-year-olds have had sex.
- 1 in 10 U.S. females aged 15-19 becomes pregnant each year - 84% unintentionally.
- 1 in 6 teens contracts a sexually transmitted infection.

Recognize these young people are very much like the friends and schoolmates of your own children. They may *be* your own children, your nieces and nephews. They come from all socio-economic levels, ethnic backgrounds, and religious affiliations. They remind us that teen sex and pregnancy are not confined to big cities, or specific racial or economic groups.

No, these are problems of sexual ignorance... and sexual ignorance cuts across all lines.

Comparatively speaking, “How do you make a baby?” is a piece of cake. Now the questions are far more intense. Given the social/sexual pressures faced by adolescents today, clear, open and explicit family communication is essential.

Please know that family discussions about sex need not be conducted with a sense of urgency or doom. Parents are encouraged to address issues such as sexual intercourse, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections

early - before they become immediate issues, and thus a possible source of controversy between parent and child.

Most 7th graders are capable of understanding the broader implications of sexual relationships. Not yet deeply involved, they're better able to have calm, rational discussions with mom and dad about why some teens might choose to have sexual intercourse - including the responsibilities involved and possible consequences.

Granted, the conversation may feel a bit awkward or uncomfortable at first, especially if the family has little history of open sexual discussion. That's ok. The process may take time. Be patient and gentle - with your child and yourself.

This is a perfect opportunity for parents to share personal values and attitudes around sexuality, in a non-threatening, non-judgmental manner. It's also a good time to clean up any misinformation about the mechanics of reproduction... as well as other sexual issues.

Despite all that young people have heard about sexuality - from family, peers and the media, it's amazing how little they really know or understand. And, it's surprising how much they need to know... at such an early age.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 7 - No. 5

Have You Hugged Your Kid Today?

Anxieties surrounding puberty are very big indeed. With attention focused on easing young people through this transition, parent concerns are often overlooked.

Puberty is truly an awkward time for mom and dad. Watching sons and daughters mature sexually is both delightful and disconcerting as parents struggle to relate to their new "growing up person." Ambivalence toward your child's blossoming sexuality is perfectly normal.

Uncertainty can be especially great for the other gender parent who may misinterpret puberty as a signal to "back off" physically. Vague questions can arise about "appropriate" touch, particularly between fathers and daughters.

Perhaps it's the deeply ingrained incest taboo or the misconception that at this age, "kids no longer want or need the physical affection." Whatever the reason, hugs, kisses, and physical touch so freely shared before may now become awkward and strained.

It's painful and confusing. To a child experiencing the usual insecurities of puberty, this unexplained withdrawal of affection is especially troubling. The result can be loneliness, confusion and

lack of connection, for both parents *and* children.

When struggling with questions of physical touch and affection, parents might consider this: *Puberty is a time when young people desperately want to feel normal, accepted, and loved. It's a time when kids need support, reassurance, and appropriate physical contact which says "You're OK."*

The need is there, and often intense. Yet a 7th grader rarely admits, "I'd sure love a hug right now." To confuse you even more, mom and dad, s/he may outwardly *resist* your offers of affection. Respect that, certainly - and, *recognize it's still important to offer.*

It's truly a dilemma: parents are expected to have a magical sixth sense about their children's needs and feelings (despite the fact that they are often masked by contradictory behaviors)!

Puberty is indeed a difficult time ... made even more difficult by miscommunication, and *reluctance to acknowledge and talk about the fears.* Why not share with your child your uncertainty?

One father expressed it to his 13-year-old daughter this way: "Sara, I often find myself wanting to scoop you up and hug and kiss you just like when you were a little girl. I really miss that. And I

respect that you're not a little girl anymore. I'm not sure whether you feel comfortable with all that physical affection, so I find myself being cautious about touching you. Can I count on you to let me know what's OK and what isn't?"

Of course, remind your child, "No one - *including family members* - has the right to touch or approach you in ways that make you uncomfortable. Listen to your feelings, and tell that person to stop. Tell an adult you trust."

This whole "touchy" business is very personal - and different from family to family. Some of us were raised on a diet of hugs, kisses, snuggling... and we feel more or less comfortable with that. For others, overt displays of affection are, and perhaps always were, uncomfortable. There's no right or wrong way to feel about this issue.

The point is, whether it's a hug, kiss, squeeze of the shoulder - whatever - ***giving and receiving appropriate physical touch that expresses warmth and caring is important to all of us.*** Our need for that doesn't change - even with puberty. If anything, perhaps the need becomes *greater*. So, rather than presume to know your child's feelings or how s/he wants you to act around this issue....ASK!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 8 - No. 1

Strains and Gains

Guiding children through adolescence is an incredible challenge. Despite the wisdom gleaned from their own life experiences, parents often feel unprepared for issues currently facing teens. Lessons from our own adolescence may not hold true for today's youth.

It's also true that during their children's teen years, parents are given an amazing gift: the opportunity to guide and support a young person in becoming capable and independent.

"You call raising adolescents a 'gift'?" laughed one parent. "It's the biggest struggle of my life! Rebellion! Turmoil! The complete absence of rational discussion. Hah! Some gift!"

It may be tempting to equate adolescence with horror... but to the extent parents focus on the difficulties and pain, they miss the joys.

For young people, two major tasks are at hand:

1. establishing independence - asserting themselves as separate and distinct from mom and dad.
2. defining/clarifying a personal value system.

Simultaneously, parents face their own tasks:

1. letting go - allowing children the freedom to develop their separate identities.
2. establishing an atmosphere of safety and acceptance - in which attitudes and values can be explored, tested, challenged.

Heavy stuff... thus the "horror, pain and difficulty." Yet, when you understand the parent/child roles during adolescence, you can more effectively offer guidance and support.

For parents, it's unsettling to realize, "I don't have the ultimate power to create how my child's life will be." Long before their teen years, we recognize that, in the long run, kids make their own decisions. Parent influence carries some weight, but wanes over time. Which is ok. After all, we're raising children to be responsible adults, capable (we hope) of making healthy choices in their lives.

Teens may select paths and adopt values that are different from our own, or not what we'd prefer. That's hard for parents to accept particularly when the issues are *so very big*: relationships, sex, drugs, etc.

Amidst all of this, parents are expected to let go, yet still provide guidance. This requires that they:

- offer opportunities for children to make their own mistakes...

then assist them in learning the lessons;

- express the family values and beliefs... then accept that the children may not fully embrace them;
- listen, without judgment, to ideas expressed by children... then recognize the need to offer input - not dictates - based on personal beliefs.

Sounds good... but how to apply it? Especially with tough issues like sex? How can parents help kids make wise choices about their sexual behavior in a world that is sexually explicit and permissive?

You can only do your best... and there are no guarantees. Still, you can build the odds in your child's favor. Speak truthfully and sincerely with your child about sex. Offer the facts s/he needs to be informed and safe - along with your personal values - without suggesting they are one and the same.

Your 8th grader deserves to hear information about sexual development, intercourse, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, birth control... as well as your beliefs around these issues. Many young teens are experimenting with risky sexual behaviors! And it simply isn't enough for parents to say, "Don't!"

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 8 - No. 2

But I'd Rather Talk To ...

As young people physically and sexually develop during adolescence, they're inclined to want to discuss related concerns with the same-gender parent or adult. (assuming they're OK talking about the issue to begin with!)

"I always had such a close relationship with my son, Tim," one mother recalls. I prided myself in communicating openly with him about sexuality since he was very young. Tim's dad rarely involved himself in those discussions."

"So, I was surprised - and I admit, hurt - when Tim began confiding more in his father. Now he prefers to talk to his dad about sexual issues. I wondered if I'd said or done something wrong."

Sounds like Tim is a typical young man, gravitating toward dad, especially when the subject turns to sexuality. That doesn't mean, mom, that your input is no longer important. Continue to let Tim know you're there for him. And, respect that at this stage of his life, Tim feels more comfortable discussing "guy stuff" with a guy. This a nice opportunity for Tim to develop the sharing and trust with his dad that he's long enjoyed with you.

So what about single parents or gay- and lesbian- headed fami-

lies? Parents working to be both mom and dad to their teenagers confess they struggle with sexuality issues. They might consider calling upon grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. to fill their child's need for same-gender role models.

As parents address these special adolescent needs, they create opportunities to keep communication open, share information and family values, and assist children in feeling confident and comfortable with their changing sexual selves.

Confusing Connections?

"I understand this business of same-gender role models and confidants during adolescence. What I don't understand is this intense "attachment" Rick has to his teacher, Mr. Brown. It's as though Rick has a crush on the guy! Is this... normal?"

It's not necessarily an indication that Rick is gay, if that's what you mean. And crush is a good description of what's likely going on. It's common for adolescents to develop a strong connection to a same-gender person of importance in their lives: a teacher, coach, perhaps even a classmate. This person might be someone they greatly admire, or someone they want to be like. Such friendship may offer

them a deep sense of being cared for. So what about single parents or about, understood and accepted.

The special bond they experience with this person often allows them to feel safe to seek advice or share their feelings and concerns. They may try to spend as much time as possible with this person, and may even feel jealous or upset if the relationship changes.

Such feelings can be terribly confusing to a young person - and to parents. If you're concerned about the relationship or believe your child may have concerns, talk with him or her about it. Have an open discussion about what defines a healthy friendship. Talk about the importance of honesty and respect in a relationship - no hidden motives or manipulation. Friends care about each other with no strings attached. If that's not the case, maybe it's time to reconsider the relationship.

Adolescents have many hidden anxieties about sexual orientation. "How can you tell if a person's gay?" "If a person masturbates, does that mean s/he's gay?" "Lisa and Ann are always together. They must be more than just 'friends,' don't you think?"

Lots of questions, confusion... whether they're verbalized or not. Initiate the conversation, and help your child sort it out.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 8 - No. 3

Knowledge Is Power

Talking with your teenager about the pleasures, responsibilities and risks of sex does not imply that you sanction teens having sex. Birth control, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STI's) and HIV - these are just a few of the sensitive issues young people need to understand. When parents are forthright and honest in discussing such topics, they help their children develop respect for intimate relationships.

As part of this, of course, parents share personal values, religious beliefs, moral viewpoints, etc. Certainly, children want, need and deserve that.

While no one suggests that these discussions be a "how to" manual, sexual specifics are important to the health and well being of teenagers. Without such information, they are less able to make positive, appropriate choices around sexuality. Facts about birth control, risk of pregnancy, how HIV and other STI's can be contracted *and* prevented: how does a parent approach such sensitive topics without fear of giving a double message ("Don't do it... but if you do, use a condom.")?

You *can* communicate a loving, practical message. A parent

might say something like: "Your father and I believe strongly that teenagers are not ready for the emotions, responsibilities and risks that go along with sexual intercourse. We believe in waiting until (you fill in the blank: marriage, a particular age, a committed, mature relationship... whatever you're comfortable with). If young people do have sex, they need to protect themselves from unintended pregnancy by using effective birth control and reduce the risk of infection by using condoms."

"Our hope is that you confide in us if you're ever wrestling with decisions about sex. We'll do all we can to listen and to offer you information and guidance to consider in making your choice. Our highest priority is your well-being, so we want you to be informed."

"I've told you how mom and I feel. I'm interested in hearing your thoughts about this."

Please know that offering such messages to young people does not encourage them to have sex. Rather, teenagers who are denied such information and communication are more likely to risk unprotected sex.

Remember the importance of listening to your children's opinions on these issues... even though at

times, their views may be quite different from yours (and thus, hard to hear). Make it safe for your teenager to express personal thoughts without fear of judgment or repercussions. If s/he is met with anger or intimidation, s/he won't be back a second time. And you will miss the chance to explore and evaluate a variety of ideas with your child.

Within such discussions, many worthwhile points can be made... about love, intimacy, reasons why people have sex (both good and not-so-good), peer pressure, exploitation, delaying sex... a wealth of important stuff! A genuine give-and-take of ideas can allow your child to sort out the issues and draw some conclusions - hopefully before s/he is confronted with making the choices.

HELPFUL RESOURCES:

Teenage Sexual Health

Amelia M. Withington, David A. Grimes, Robert A. Hatcher

Talking With Your Teenager

Ruth Bell & Leni Ziegler Wildflower

Straight from the Heart Carol Cassell

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 8 - No. 4

Facts About HIV/AIDS

* * * * *

- 1 in 6 teens contracts a sexually transmitted infection.
- 4 in 10 girls aged 14 will become pregnant at least once by age 20.

The same activity that puts young people at risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) also puts them at risk of HIV infection.

* * * * *

You never imagined talking so explicitly with your children about sex. Yet currently, no vaccine or medicine can prevent or cure AIDS. You're painfully aware that some teens have sex at young ages, and their experimentation with sex and drugs puts them at risk of HIV. You know the best protection you can offer is education. Surely you want to provide that.

It's time for significant detail about HIV transmission and prevention... to clear up misconceptions or fears your children may have.... and to keep them safe.

Preview the HIV curriculum being used at school to supplement and support the program at home. While many students receive classroom instruction on this and related sexual issues, family input is essential as well. This provides

reinforcement of information and opportunity to share family values and parental guidance.

8th graders should understand the following:

- AIDS is caused by HIV (human immunodeficiency virus). Once in the bloodstream, HIV weakens the immune system so the body cannot effectively fight off disease.
- The 4 body fluids known to transmit HIV are blood, semen, vaginal fluid and breast milk. Risk behaviors are activities that involve exposure to these fluids, for example: unprotected intercourse (vaginal, anal or oral) with an infected person; sharing needles (used for injection drugs, steroids, etc.) with an infected person. (Do not share razors, body piercing needles or tattooing instruments.)
- HIV can be passed from mother to baby during pregnancy, birth or breast feeding.
- People have contracted HIV from blood transfusions. Since 1985, donated blood and blood products have been screened for the virus, so the risk of receiving infected blood is miniscule.
- HIV does not discriminate. It affects people of all ages, races, religions. It is not confined to gay men or injection drug users. Anyone engaging in risky behaviors can be exposed to the virus.
- HIV is not transmitted by casual contact. Hugging, kissing, sharing

food with an infected person, being sneezed or coughed on by an HIV+ person: none of these is risky.

- AIDS cannot be cured at this time. HIV infection *can* be prevented. The only 100% prevention is abstaining from sharing needles and risky sexual behaviors.
- There are medications that can slow down the progression of HIV, but they are not effective for everyone, and they aren't a cure. The person is still infected with HIV, and can infect others.
- If a person does have sexual intercourse, s/he should know that: the more sexual partners, the greater the risk of exposure; correct and consistent use of latex condoms offers protection against the spread of HIV and other STIs. (Share information on correct condom use. This is not a 100% guarantee, but is highly effective. Birth control pills and other contraceptives reduce the risk of pregnancy, but only abstinence and latex condoms protect against HIV and other STIs.)

Although family discussions about HIV / AIDS / STIs can be uncomfortable and difficult, they can also be empowering... that's the good news.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 8 - No. 5

Media Mania: *Sex Sells*

Parents recognize that while they strongly influence their children's lives, they're not the *only* ones. In considering decisions about sexuality, young people hear many voices: parents, friends, media, health professionals, the clergy - each contributing influence and pressure which affect the choices.

You can't guarantee that your sons and daughters won't have sexual intercourse during their teen years. You can, however, assist them with information, guidance, and strategies for dealing with pressures that encourage sex among youth. While the pressures are many and powerful, some of the most dramatic stem from the media. Consider the following national survey results:

- The average viewer is exposed yearly to 20,000+ sexually explicit messages on TV.
- Teens spend approx. 24 hours per week watching TV; 16 hours per week listening to the radio. By age 18, the average student has spent 15,000+ hours watching TV, but only 11,000 hours in school.

Explicit media messages about sexual behavior permeate our lives - every day. Sex is used to sell everything from swimwear to toothpaste. TV sitcoms sizzle

with passionate interplay and sexual innuendoes. Song lyrics, music videos and billboards graphically depict sexy images.

The media affect people in many ways. Witnessing those "perfect" figures may leave us feeling inadequate about our own bodies. For adolescents in a stage of dramatic (usually awkward) development, the impact can be devastating. By suggesting that the ultimate love life and a desirable body are of utmost importance, the media promote unrealistic expectations. This can set teens up for disappointment and dissatisfaction with themselves and their relationships.

Sometimes the message is more subtle. Consider sex role stereotyping. In ads, for example, who usually touts laundry soap, diet foods, or quick and easy dinner menus? Women. Often associated with domestic chores and "softer" job responsibilities... "a great looker, but not too bright"... the traditional female stereotype is perpetuated by the media.

Male roles tend to be equally stifling. True, they're cast as more assertive, independent, powerful, successful, intelligent... all of which are viewed favorably. Yet they also model lack of sensitivity, a "one-track mind" approach

to relationships, and the "macho" image which discourages healthy social/emotional development in males.

The sadness of it all is that we've become so accustomed to the limiting stereotypes in the media, that we're almost oblivious to them!

We need not sit idly by, simply allowing this all to be. We can empower our children by alerting them to the pervasiveness as well as the implications of sexual messages. Confront these messages whenever they appear. Assert your feelings about them, and encourage your child to do the same.

As a family, examine how distortions of the media influence attitudes and decisions around many sexual issues: body image, relationships, male/female roles and expectations, readiness for sex, sexual responsibility, etc.

Active viewing and analysis of media messages serve to place young people back in the driver's seat regarding media influence in their lives. And that's exactly where we want them to be!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 9 - No. 1

What I Really Want to Know Is...

How can you tell you're in love? What's it like to have sex? Do you just know what to do? How old should you be? How do you know if it's the right person?

A typical group of 9th graders asked these questions at a recent parent/teen workshop designed to help families communicate about sex. When asked to write down (anonymously) what they really wished they could discuss with parents, many teens listed these items.

Surprised? The parents were - at first. But on further reflection, parents found they weren't really surprised by the questions. Rather, they were caught off guard - and unprepared to answer.

Teens wonder about love, sex, relationships. They want details: how, why and when. They have lists of curiosities and concerns, and are rarely encouraged to voice them. Often they don't feel safe enough to speak with parents about such intimate matters.

Assume that given the chance, your 9th grader would ask you about all of this. Wouldn't you like to share your ideas? After all, peers and the media certainly spread their messages about sex.

If you added your message, what would it be?

These questions may cause you discomfort. You're being asked to look deeply into your own values. You may have difficulty putting your feelings into words at first... that's ok. The words may not form easily, but that's no reason to avoid the subject. Your children do care what you think, feel and value. They want to hear from you.

So how do you begin - especially if you and your teen rarely (or never) talk with each other about sexuality? First, realize this needn't be THE BIG TALK. Young people aren't just interested in sex. They want to know about the whole business of living: connecting and relating to others and understanding themselves. Sharing your innermost feelings about your own life, your own growing up years, can give kids insight... and comfort. It opens doors for discussion of lots of things... including sex.

To start a conversation, consider the following interview used in the parent/teen workshop. This can be a special sharing time for you and your child. **Begin by agreeing on ground rules, for example:**

1. All that is shared is confidential;
2. You can speak honestly, without fear of consequences;
3. You can pass if you choose; etc.

FOR TEENS TO ASK PARENTS:

- *What did you enjoy most about being a teenager? What was most difficult?*
- *What did you learn growing up that now helps you as an adult?*
- *What's the best part about being a parent? The most difficult?*
- *Tell me about the day I was born.*
- *How did you feel about other- and same-gendered friends when you were my age? Did you have a boyfriend/girlfriend? When were you allowed to date?*
- *What was expected of you because of your gender? How do you feel about those expectations now?*
- *How have you felt about physical changes in your body?*
- *What would you change about your body... if you could?*

FOR PARENTS TO ASK TEENS:

- *What do you enjoy most about being your age? What's most difficult?*
- *What's most important in your life now?*
- *What do you see as pros & cons of being male/female?*
- *What are some things you look for in a friend?*
- *What do you wish we could talk about more openly together?*
- *How have you felt about the physical changes in your body?*
- *What would you change about your body... if you could?*

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 9 - No. 2

Walls ... and Bridges

Premarital sex, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections. Safer sex. Love, commitment, intimacy, relationships.

Visualize having a frank and open discussion with your 9th grader about these issues. What fears, concerns or emotions get in the way for you?

Communicating with youth about sex. As parents, we *should* be doing it ... most of us *want* to be doing it ... but often *don't*. Because of the stuff that gets in the way. Stuff like **FEAR** (“*What if my son rejects the values I so want him to live by?*”); **CONFUSION** (“*If I discuss birth control or 'safer sex' practices with my daughter, won't she think I approve of her having sex?*”); **EMBARRASSMENT** (“*I feel awkward even using the words 'penis' and 'vagina'... how in the world can I possibly talk about anal intercourse as a behavior that increases the risk of HIV infection?*”); **LACK OF INFORMATION** (“*Menstrual cycle... wet dreams... I know the basics, but I haven't a clue about all the details.*”).

Even parents who were fairly open about sexual discussions when their children were little will often find themselves stuck,

unnerved, or just plain at a loss once the adolescent years hit.

Yes, the issues *are* far more complex... AND, it's *more* than that. The parent/child roles change significantly. With small children, parents essentially set the rules, promote the values, and select the paths for learning and growth. With adolescents, parents discuss (perhaps negotiate) rules and offer a rationale for their importance. Values continue to be emphasized and promoted... but at times with a panicked assertiveness (which can trigger anger, frustration... and an end to the conversation). **A very real fear is that our children may balk at some core beliefs and attitudes we want them to embrace.**

Ultimately, teens challenge, test, and accept, reject or modify their parents' values. Studies show that adolescents endorse many of the family's basic values and beliefs. It is also true is that they accept (at least temporarily) the values endorsed by their peers.

You can create safety *within the family* for your children to discuss or question differing values. Encourage them to think out loud, to examine beliefs and the possible impact of going with (or against) those beliefs. Frank discussions in which parents and children listen to and speak with

(not at) one another enhance young people's ability to make thoughtful choices.

As you speak with your child about issues such as birth control, teen pregnancy, etc., your responsibility to present family values coexists with a responsibility to provide factual information. Teenagers can accept a parent message that endorses abstinence as well as the importance of sexual protection for those choosing to have intercourse. *These are not mutually exclusive values.* They're not contradictions. This is a loving message which assists teens in developing positive, respectful attitudes and behaviors around sexuality. Unlike “Just say *no*”, it's a message that gets through to kids; that supports growth, maturity and thoughtful decision-making.

Remember: the stuff that gets in the way of open parent/teen communication about sex is the same stuff that sabotages the growth of positive and responsible sexual beliefs and behaviors. It is the very stuff that results in kids at risk. And... it is also the stuff we can confront, challenge, and change!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 9 - No. 3

Peer Power

In a nationwide poll, teens named social pressure as a major reason young people don't wait until they're older to have sexual intercourse. Males and females said they personally felt pressured by peers to go farther with sexual activity than they wanted.

Peer influence is especially powerful during the teen years. Eager for approval, acceptance and popularity, young people often see no other alternative than going along with the crowd.

Parents feel anxious about this for many reasons, including the recognition that their own influence is declining. It's tempting to simply lay down the law: "No argument... just do as I tell you." This may bring short-term compliance from a teen (along with anger and resentment). But the long-term goal gets lost: teaching adolescents to make thoughtful decisions; to deal with issues, challenges and peer pressure when mom and dad are not there.

Parents can help teens build knowledge, skills, and a vocabulary to confront peer pressure around sexual decision-making. This requires an appreciation of how that pressure might work. For example, some girls feel pressured by boyfriends: "If you loved

me, you would." Or, "What's the big deal? Everybody else is doing it."

Encourage your teen to find creative replies to such lines: "If you really cared about me, you wouldn't push me into something I'm not ready for." "If everybody else is doing it, you don't need me to." It helps to practice words in response to verbal pressures.

Given an opportunity, many boys express frustration with pressure they feel from male peers. "You didn't do anything? What's wrong with you? Come on, be a man." "Go for it - even if she says 'no,' that only means she wants to be talked into it."

The typical locker room is filled with tales of sexual exploits: little truth, and lots of fabrication. For a sexually inexperienced male, the anxiety mounts. Having a quick response can take the edge off. Something like... "Look, what my girlfriend and I do together is no one's business. I don't need to prove anything to you or anyone else."

Let your teens know you understand how intense sexual feelings can be during adolescence. Remind them that these perfectly normal feelings can be confusing. It may be difficult to know what to do, how to act.

Help your children sort out the possible effects of sexual decisions *before* they face the choices. Ask them to weigh any consequences of saying "no" to sexual activity, as well as saying "yes." Describe situations and ask them to consider the outcomes. Talk about "set-ups" - in which sexual activity is more likely to occur. For example: "What if Diane decides to spend the day at her boyfriend's when no one else is home?" "What if Kurt and his girlfriend go to a party where they drink alcohol (or do drugs)? How might that affect their decisions about sex?"

Help your teenager decide on acceptable, responsible ways of expressing love, affection, sexuality. If you believe sexual intercourse is *not* OK for teens, by all means, *say so...* then discuss what sexual expression is OK.

Young people need support in preparing for sexual pressures they're likely to face. Don't just assume they know enough to stay out of those situations. Help them develop the skills to *get out of those situations* - just in case they land in one.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 9 - No. 4

Other Side of the Coin ...

- Each year, 1 in 10 U.S. teen girls becomes pregnant, 84% unintentionally.
- 8 in 10 young mothers who give birth by age 18 never finish high school.
- 1 in 6 teens contracts a sexually transmitted infection.

Shocking statistics mark the difficulties surrounding teenage sexual activity. These problems demand our attention and concern; families must address such issues as they instruct teens about the risks and responsibilities attached to sex.

Amidst all of this, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that sexuality is a richly exciting and special part of life. Some parents tend to focus solely on the horrors that result from "sex too soon," and neglect to share the rest of the story.

It's important - and only fair - that parents present intercourse as more than just "the baby-making process." Kids deserve to understand that people have sex for many reasons, including intimacy and pleasure. (Teenagers strongly suspect this anyway, so why not talk about it?!)

Of course you will talk with your 9th grader about sexual expression within the context of your

own beliefs and values. Whether you wish to emphasize marriage, or a mature, committed relationship, or whatever... please reinforce that sex, at the right time, can be a delightful expression of love, sharing, connection, etc.

Yes, sexual relationships can also lead to serious problems, especially for the young, the uninformed, the unprepared. If we present only that angle, however we're giving incomplete, distorted, "sex-negative" messages. That is a disservice.

It is important to teach children that sex means different things to different people. Misunderstanding a partner's views or expectations of what sex is all about can result in confusion, unhappiness... crises. Such is the pattern we frequently see with teenage sexual activity - when sex typically happens with little or no communication beforehand. The experience is often disappointing at the very least... and many times filled with anxiety, guilt, embarrassment, regret.

Because parents want to warn against all of this, they often focus on the crises that can follow teen sex. They may do so with the best of intentions: in an effort to spare children pain and unhappiness; to point out possible dan-

gers; perhaps to promote certain values and beliefs.

Parents may avoid talking about the joys and pleasures of sexual intercourse because they fear encouraging teens. Remember, teenagers are already encouraged to try sex... by the "mythinformation" broadcast by peers; by distortions in the media; by their own curiosity and emerging sexual feelings. Parental silence will not temper such influence.

Honest, loving family discussion about sexual experience does more to prevent the difficulties of "sex too soon" than any scare tactics or half truths - no matter how well intentioned. One father stated it quite eloquently: "I want to raise my child to be a good lover. Not a performer, but a good lover. To me that embodies love, respect, honor, maturity, responsibility, honesty, commitment, growth, intimacy, joy and pleasure."

Imagine if all parents raised their children to be such "good lovers." The impact on their lives could be tremendous. And society may well see a reduction in the difficulties of teen sexual behavior.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 9 - No. 5

Time To Recap

Many of the sexual topics discussed with your child when s/he was younger take on more urgency and evoke new or immediate interest during adolescence. You may think you have explained to death such issues as the menstrual cycle, sexual relationships, pregnancy, childbirth, etc. Surely your teen has a clear understanding of all this by now! Not necessarily. At any rate, it doesn't hurt to review, especially now that the issues are more pertinent.

This is a good time to remind both boys and girls about the development and workings of each other's bodies. Let's not isolate by discussing the menstrual cycle only with daughters, or wet dreams only with sons. **Your daughters and sons will be interacting with the other gender throughout life. It's important that they understand and appreciate how each other's bodies function.**

This is also an ideal time to re-emphasize cause and effect with regard to sexual activity and pregnancy. You'd be amazed at how many high school students still don't get it. Their lack of understanding is apparent in the misconceptions many of them

hold. **So parents, remind your children that:**

- Depending on a woman's cycle, pregnancy may still be possible, even if intercourse happens during (or just before, or just after) your period. Assume there is no "safe time" for teens to have unprotected sex.
- You can get pregnant if you only have sex once... or once in a while.
- Taking birth control pills offers protection against pregnancy, but not against sexually transmitted infections or HIV.

Misconceptions about sexual issues are even held by many adults. Don't be too surprised if you're one of them. And you needn't be concerned if you don't have all the answers or if you're unsure about the details. You don't have to be a "sex-pert" to communicate with your children. Fortunately, if you need assistance, there's a great deal available.

It's not within the scope of this newsletter series to provide thorough coverage of sex education issues. Rather, "***There's No Place Like Home...***" is designed to help parents become more aware of the kinds of information young people need; it's intended to encourage family communication

about sex, and to suggest ways in which that communication might be fostered.

The following resources are very useful for specific details on a wide range of sexuality and other issues. In addition, many of them also provide valuable communication tips:

FOR TEENS:

Growing Up Feeling Good

Ellen Rosenberg

Changing Bodies, Changing

Lives Ruth Bell & Leni Ziegler
Wildflower

The Teenage Body Book Guide to Sexuality Kathy McCoy

FOR PARENTS:

Raising a Child Conservatively in a Sexually Permissive World

Sol Gordon & Judith Gordon

How to Talk With Your Child

About Sexuality Planned Parenthood Federation of America

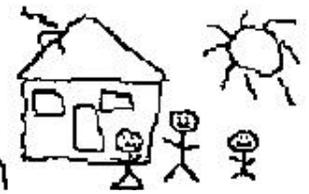
Talking With Your Teenager

Ruth Bell & Leni Ziegler
Wildflower

All About Sex: A Family Resource on Sex and Sexuality

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 10 - No. 1

Talking to Teens

"I've never really talked much with my daughter about sex. But took she's in 10th grade... it's a little late now, don't you think? She'll learn what she needs to in health class."

Parents, it's never too late to talk with your child about sex. True, the ideal is to begin when they're small. Still, your input is valuable at all stages of your child's development. And while health class is an important source of factual information about sex, you are the source of family values.

Teens need to know more than just sexual facts. They want answers about the intangibles of sex. They're curious about the emotions, about values and morals; they want support with dating pressures and expectations; they're confused about sexual feelings and urges; they wonder about love.

Much of what they'd really like to know is highly personal... not health class material. Surveys show that teens wish they could ask mom and dad.

So what keeps teens from approaching parents with their concern? A major obstacle is fear of being judged:

• *"If I asked my dad about sex, he'd think I was doing it!"*

• *"I'm still trying to figure out my own feelings about sex.. like when is the right time, who's the right person, and all that. My folks have pretty set ideas: you have sex if you're married. Period. I'm not sure if I agree with that, but I wouldn't try to talk to them about it. They'd just get mad."*

• *"I think my parents would really be hurt if I didn't agree with their views about sex. So I don't talk about it."*

Other teens avoid the subject because they think parents won't take them seriously:

• *"My folks still think I'm a little kid, and that little kids don't need to know this stuff."*

• *"If I even hint that I think some guy at school is cute, mom teases me. No way could I have a serious discussion with her about sex."*

Might some of these concerns be getting in the way for your teen? Imagine sitting down with your 10th grader and saying something like this:

"I really do care how you feel about things, and I understand we won't always agree. That's ok. Just because we have different views doesn't mean our relation-

ship is going to fall apart. I love you. I hope you can come to me with your questions, concerns, ideas - no matter what the subject: sex, drugs, relationships, school. I'll do my best to listen, to understand, and help if I can. I don't often talk to you about these sorts of things because I wouldn't want you to think I'm grilling you. But I am interested, and I'm here if you need me."

Opening doors. No matter what your child's age, it's never too late to open doors. There may be disagreements on important issues. Can you accept that... and still keep the doors open? Seen through adult eyes of experience, your teenager's concerns may seem trivial. Can you accept that, and still treat those concerns seriously? While your input is wanted and needed, ultimately your teenager has to take charge, be allowed to grow, and trusted to make personal decisions. Can you accept that, knowing that in the process s/he may choose differently from you, or that s/he will make mistakes?

It takes effort to open doors and keep them open - extra effort if parents and kids have not talked much about these personal issues in the past. But do try now. Parents have so much to offer... and children are so eager to know.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 10 - No. 2

What's A Parent To Do!?

This parenting business is an awesome task ... awesome as in stressful, challenging, rewarding, scary, delightful, frustrating, powerful, and incredibly BIG... all at the same time.

Wanting the best for their children, parents struggle to find the right answers, deliver the appropriate guidance and create the deal experiences. And as parents face the awesomeness of parenthood, their kids face the awesomeness of "kidhood," which can be intense.

Specific to sexuality, the confusion and anxieties of both parents and teens reach new heights. No longer is it as simple as, "What about pregnancy?" Sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, abortion... the stakes are high at a time when many young people are sexually active and sexually ignorant.

Gaining knowledge and skills to make responsible sexual decisions is one of the most important challenges facing teens. Parents cannot guarantee right answers, appropriate guidance, and ideal experiences. Even if they could, there are no guaranteed results. Parents can, however, build the odds in their children's favor:

1. BE A HEALTHY, POSITIVE ROLE MODEL

Watching their own parents and other caring adults relate with one another, teens learn about love and intimacy. Through your behavior, you can teach your children how to create mature, loving relationships (and how to cope with difficult ones). Help them see that sex is wonderful, AND it has its place as part of the larger picture. Emphasize commitment, love and communication as some of the other critical pieces.

Married and single parents alike can model loving, honest relationships. The value of such example is clear. According to Dr. Sol Gordon, an expert in the field of sexuality education: *"The quality of love and caring by parents or other important adults in a child's life is the single most significant component of a child's sex education."*

2. REMAIN CONNECTED

Parental expressions of love, attention and support do not lose their importance or appeal during the teen years. While they may not directly request - and may at times resist - signs of affection from mom and dad, **teenagers need to hear and feel they are loved.** Hugs, kisses, a squeeze of the hand, a pat on the back - whatever is agreed upon - **please stay "in touch" with your teen.** Experiencing family love and

support builds a young person's sense of self worth and can reduce the need to seek love, touch and human connection in less healthy ways.

3. PROMOTE A SENSE OF THE FUTURE

Help your teenager plan and reach goals. Encourage dreams, ambitions and exploration of career opportunities (avoiding stereotyped male/female options). Vision and goals for a bright future will encourage responsible choices.

4. PAY ATTENTION TO THE PROCESS

Growing up is just that - a process. Great opportunities for learning and insight occur all along the way. They're easily missed if adolescence is viewed as a race or survival course, the sole purpose being to get to the end.

Help your teen take the process slowly, to remain attentive and to recognize that it's the experience of the process - appreciation of and learning from growth - which results in true knowledge, awareness and maturity.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 10 - No. 3

The Art of Setting Limits

Young people need and want limits. Sure, they grumble, complain, and generally storm about the house insisting, *"That's not fair! You're treating me like a baby! The other kids aren't treated like this."* To which a typical (ineffective) parent response is often, *"I don't care about the other kids. I care about you!"*

Sound familiar? It could be an instant replay of your own teen years. Remember the lines you swore you'd never use if you became a parent? Like: "As long as you live in this house, you live by my rules." "So all the other kids stay out late. You're not the other kids." "I don't *have* to give you a reason. I said 'no.' That's all there is to it!"

Groan. More and more you use those very words you found frustrating as a teenager. You're not trying to be unreasonable. It's just that you're a parent, with years of life experience, 20-20 hindsight, and memories of being in 10th grade. You want to protect your child. And if you're totally honest, you might admit that you fear losing whatever control you may have left over this "soon-to-be-young-adult."

You know all about teen pregnancies, children having children,

sexually transmitted infections, HIV and AIDS. You feel somewhat justified retreating to the tactics your own folks used with you - the absolute rules enforced for your own good.

Yet you know strict prohibitions can backfire. Rigid dictates with no room for negotiation often create rebellion in teens. Parents can't realistically lock them up. Sure, you can try to keep them from experimenting with sex by refusing to allow dating or by imposing strict curfews. Though well-intentioned, such attempts are frequently misguided and futile.

Consider this: Research shows that teenagers typically have sex at home, after school, before mom and/or dad get home from work. It would seem more useful to agree on expectations for after-school activities: a routine of homework, chores, organized programs, sports, etc.

You could insist that no friends be in the house without an adult... at which your child may squawk "I can't believe this! Don't you trust me?" And you might say, "This isn't about trust. It's about helping you avoid difficult situations that you may not know how to handle."

Be up front about your concerns and the basis for your decisions. "Because I'm your parent, that's why!" is ineffective and cultivates resentment and anger. Try this: "I know sexual urges and feelings can be so powerful. It's important we agree on some limits which will help you stay in control of your decisions."

Help your 10th grader set reasonable limits for socializing with friends. Suggest ways to reduce the potential for problems: parties must be chaperoned, no alcohol or drugs, dating in groups, etc. Remember, when kids help create the rules they're more likely to comply. AND, they learn from the process.

Parents want to minimize the chances of kids getting into situations they're not ready to handle. Young people want to avoid that risk too. Yet they may not have developed skills to anticipate or negotiate those situations. So they're relieved to have the limits, and grateful to use mom and dad as an excuse when they need one. Of course, they won't admit to appreciating the boundaries, but that too is part of being a teenager... remember?

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 10 - No. 4

Why Should the School Take a Parent's Place as Sex Educator?

It shouldn't! In an ideal world, parents and kids would talk together about sexual issues with ease, grace and comfort. Conversations would be open; accurate information would be presented, values shared, and positive, healthy attitudes toward sexuality promoted. In an ideal world.

The reality is, both parents and kids are looking for assistance with this sex education business. More so than ever before, parents recognize the importance of providing children with the information and skills they need to understand and appreciate sexuality. During the teenage years, certain issues become even more pertinent: peer pressure, dating, sexual decision-making, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, HIV...

In the past, "just say 'no'" might have been enough. It's certainly easier when they're 10. You simply say, "*You're not ready for sex. Period.*" But what do you say when they're 17 or 18?

Parents realize that, given the times we live in, "just say 'no'" is no longer enough to offer our teens. Parents realize that part of

their job is to teach adolescents about handling challenges when mom and dad aren't around. Parents are wanting help with this, and increasingly, they seek that help from the schools.

Studies show that nearly 90% of parents favor sex education in the schools. Yet ironically, fewer than 10% of students nationwide receive comprehensive sexuality education programs. What classes are offered are usually far too little, far too late.

Long overdue is the creation of a family-school partnership which actively supports and promotes sexuality education. Serving in advocacy and advisory positions, parents can assist schools in providing quality programs for youth. But the school needs to hear from mom and dad if this is ever to work.

So much energy has been put into painting sex education as a controversial subject, that many school administrators and teachers have come to believe this is so. If you are a parent in support of such education, you deserve to be heard... and your school deserves to hear from you.

Active parent involvement in the curriculum process is an education and an opportunity. It allows for the building of agreement and

trust with regard to both the content and quality of the program.

And the outcome? Research shows that school-based sexuality education can make a difference. It can:

- increase knowledge
- reach young people before they are faced with sexual decisions
- increase parent/child communication
- increase decision-making skills
- increase young people's self-esteem
- help teenagers resist premature or exploitive sexual experiences
- give sexually active teens the information and confidence to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections

Noble achievements. As parents and schools work in partnership for the sexuality education of youth, our children reap the benefits. They emerge the winners. So does the family... and society as a whole.

Noble achievements.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 10 - No. 5

Beyond "Plumbing"

The program was entitled "*Let's Talk About Sex.*" The purpose was to bring parents and teens together and help them find ways to discuss sexual issues with each other more comfortably, honestly and thoughtfully.

What an eye opener!

The group began by sharing why sex is hard to talk about. They described embarrassment, uncertainty and ignorance around the topic. Parents worried that giving too much information could encourage sexual activity.

"My folks never talked to me about sex. I turned out ok, "one dad offered. "But it's different today," said another. "Teens have sex at younger ages, become pregnant, get abortions, have babies... they need information! I'm just not sure how to give it."

The teenagers feared parental judgment. "I'm not having sex, but if I start asking a lot of questions, my parents might think I am." "Most kids who are having sex know their parents would be furious if they knew. They're not going to talk about it!" One young man added, "Adults get kind of preachy about what they think is right for their kids. Nobody likes getting preached at. Anyway, it doesn't work."

Interestingly enough, when asked how well their own families communicate about sex, parents and teens had very different opinions. Parents saw themselves as more open and willing to discuss sexual issues than their kids did. The teenagers assumed mom and dad wouldn't want to talk about it, so they didn't bother to ask. Many agreed that parents covered the basics of sex... "the plumbing:" menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, etc. But they wanted to know so much more!

"Like what?" the teens were asked. "What else do you wish you could discuss with your parents?" They wrote feverishly (and anonymously) on cards that were then read to the group.

What an eye opener! Here's what these young people wrote:

- What's wrong with teens, say, 17 or 18 - having sex if they really care about each other and if they use protection?
- How does a person know if s/he's gay? Can s/he change?
- How do you know what to do when you have sex?
- My best friend's getting an abortion. Nobody else knows. What do I say to her?
- I know a girl whose boyfriend forced her to have sex with him. He said she lead him on. Is that rape?

Parents were amazed at the depth and complexity of the issues. It hadn't occurred to them that 15-year-olds wondered about some of this stuff. "I'm not sure what to say," one mother exclaimed. She was not alone.

The following resources were suggested for great information and the practical "how-to's" of talking about sex.

Talking With Your Teenager

Ruth Bell & Leni Ziegler Wildflower

One Teenager in Ten: Writings by Gay and Lesbian Youth

Ann Heron, editor

Straight from the Heart Carol Cassell

Talk About Sex Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.

It was useful for parents and teens to hear from each other about the anxieties and discomforts that might get in the way of talking together about sexuality. To parents, teens suggest:

"Listen, as well as talk; please respect our differences; discuss, don't preach; don't wait for us to ask." And the parents advised teenagers: **"Listen, as well as talk; please respect our differences; discuss, don't argue; Don't wait for us... ASK!"**

What an eye opener!

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 11 - No. 1

Share Your Wisdom

Adolescence is not a disease. It is a time of explosive growth and development at many levels. Love and patience are tested to the limits. Teens are like chameleons: one day wise, mature and responsible; the next day inappropriate in their behavior, lacking in sound judgment.

Not a particularly good time for sex to enter the picture. Yet, at this stage, it sometimes does. Studies show that about half of all 17-year-olds have had sexual intercourse. Typical, everyday kids: from all social, economic and religious backgrounds. Just like the kids next door. Just like *your* kids.

Maybe you should talk.

OK, so it's hard. You acknowledge that, and go on. What do you say? It's up to you. ***You're the expert when it comes to your family values and beliefs around sexuality.*** You may need help gathering your ideas or forming the words. But you do know what to say. Look into your heart. What messages do you have for your children? What do you wish for them?

As you consider this, remember some of the BIG items on the minds of 16- and 17-year-olds:

What's wrong with teens having sex as long as they're responsible?

You might suggest that responsibility goes far beyond preventing pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STI's). Many believe sex is for marriage, or at least for the adult years. Parents need to share their beliefs about this with their children. Whether or not the kids agree, it still needs to be said.

You might explain that most teens aren't emotionally ready for the intense impact intercourse can have on a relationship. Sexual activity begun in the teen years usually results in more partners over time. Ask your teen to imagine the emotional effects of repeated break ups of relationships that include intercourse. Add to this that more partners equal greater risk of exposure to STI's.

Parents know many reasons why even "responsible" teens are better off delaying sex until they're older. Share those reasons with *your* teen.

How can you tell if you're really in love?

Talk about the difference between love and sex. ***Sexual attraction creates powerful feelings which may be mistaken for love.*** The

passion of the moment can be overwhelming. People are "swept away," often with unfortunate results.

Love takes time and work. It's about respecting each other; sharing and communicating; wanting to be together; love is supportive and honors agreements; it doesn't pressure or coerce; it doesn't take advantage. ***Love may or may not include sex.***

Teens get confused. They live with a language that calls "having sex" "making love," regardless of the relationship. They presume being "turned on" is the same as being "in love," and is therefore a justification for "making love." Nobody has bothered to explain the difference!

Explain the difference to your teen. S/he may say, "Come on, I already know this stuff!" Be persistent. Say something like, "I know you do, but bear with me, ok? I'm checking in to be sure *I've* got it straight."

At some point your child will be making choices about sex. Regardless of when that happens, it's important s/he have a clear understanding of issues like sex, love, infatuation, attraction, etc.

Maybe you should talk.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 11 - No. 2

The Abortion Issue

Each year approximately 1.3 million abortions occur in the U.S.; about 1/3 to teens.

Abortion is an intense, emotionally charged issue. Individual views are affected by deeply held religious convictions, personal values, life experiences, etc. Your teenager would welcome and benefit from your willingness to explore with them the facts, feelings and controversy around the issue.

Be thoughtful and accurate with your information. Misrepresenting facts in an effort to sway opinion one way or another is a disservice to teens. Discussion about abortion should not be seen as a debate, or an attempt to challenge or change another's values.

Rather it is an opportunity to share information and personal ideas and to explore the complexities of the issue. It's an opportunity to listen as well as talk.

Abortion a powerful social issue which is likely to affect your children, *personally*, at some point in their lives. They may confront that decision themselves one day, or a friend, loved one, or family member may face that decision. Certainly the more informed your children are, the more they can be

of support, regardless of whether they agree with the ultimate choice. It's likely that within their lifetime, your children will be called upon to vote on an abortion-related measure. They will want to be informed.

Family discussion about abortion presents an ideal opportunity to address a vital, underlying issue: *unintended and crisis pregnancies*. **Help your teenager appreciate the importance of pregnancy prevention.**

The concept of planning for parenthood embodies the belief that **children are important... certainly important enough to be consciously and carefully planned. Children are far too special to allow them to happen by chance.** Yet we see hundreds of thousands of teenagers in this country becoming pregnant by chance...having babies by chance...

Issues such as abortion, unplanned pregnancies, pregnancy prevention, etc., are no doubt challenging to discuss with your teenager. And it's essential that you do so.

Date/Acquaintance Rape

If your 11th grader is becoming more interested in relationships and dating, now's a good time to discuss yet another difficult issue:

date rape. Statistics tell us that 70-90% of all rape victims were either dating or at least acquainted with the rapist. One third of the victims were teenagers.

A few pointers to share with your teens:

- *Say what you mean - strongly and clearly.*
- *Set limits before any sexual expression takes place - even kissing.*
- *You can say "no" at any point.*
- *"No" means "no", not "maybe."*
- *No one "owes" sex to a date.*
- *Trust your feelings.*
- *Avoid being alone with someone you don't know well.*
- *Beware of a date who doesn't take "no" for an answer on other issues.*
- *It is NEVER ok to force any sexual behavior on someone.*

In addition to these important messages, there are excellent resources to share with your teen:

No is Not Enough C. Adams, J. Fay & J. Loreen-Martin

Nobody Told Me It Was Rape Caren Adams & Jennifer Fay

So What's It to Me? G. Stringer & D. Rants-Rodriguez

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 11 - No. 3

You Need To Talk

Even families which openly discuss sexuality often see a decline in the amount of discussion as children get older. Perhaps it's that the issues are more complex and value-laden. Teen pregnancy, premarital sex, birth control, sexually transmitted infections, sexual orientation... not knowing quite what to say or how to say it, parents often avoid the subject.

Parents may mistakenly believe that by their junior or senior year, kids pretty much know what they need to about sex. Nothing could be further from the truth!

At best, this can lead to confused, misinformed youth, and at worst, sexually active, sexually illiterate youth at risk of pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and exposure to HIV.

"HIV?" you say, "Surely teenagers don't need to be that concerned about HIV and AIDS... unless they're gay or injection drug users."

WRONG. Interestingly enough, that's the same misconception many teens have. Let's clear it up for you *and* for them. By grade 11, your teenager needs the following information about HIV/AIDS:

1. AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV (human immunodeficiency virus). A person infected with HIV can pass the virus to another during unprotected vaginal or anal sex; by sharing needles (used for injecting drugs, steroids, vitamins) and possibly through oral sex.

2. HIV can be passed from an infected mother to her baby during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding.

3. HIV has been contracted through transfusions with infection blood or blood products. However, since 1985 all donated blood and blood products are screened for the virus, so the risk is very, very small. HIV is not contracted by donating blood.

4. Currently there is no cure for AIDS. Medications can greatly help some HIV+ people, but not all... and they are not a cure.

5. Even with no obvious symptoms, an infected person can still pass the virus.

6. HIV infection can be prevented. Abstaining from sex and needle sharing is the surest way. If a person has vaginal, anal or oral sex, the more sexual partners, the greater the risk; it's important to know the sexual history of any sexual partner; anyone who has

engaged in unsafe sex practices should not be considered a safe partner; correct and consistent use of latex condoms offers great protection against infection. (discuss the correct way to use a condom);

7. Sharing razors, needles or piercing and tattooing instruments is risky.

8. HIV is not spread by casual contact. It's safe to hug and touch an HIV+ person, share food, utensils, towels, etc. with them; you're not in danger if an HIV+ person coughs or sneezes on you; HIV is spread only through infected blood, semen, vaginal fluids or breast milk.

Contact your local Planned Parenthood or local health department for updated HIV/AIDS information.

How to Talk With Your Child About AIDS Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Lynda Madaras Talks to Teens About AIDS Lynda Madaras

Difficult? Sure. Embarrassing? You bet. But no one has ever literally "died" of embarrassment. People – *teenagers* - have died, literally, from AIDS.

You need to talk.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 11 - No. 4

Nurturing Self Esteem

Don't be fooled by the adult-like packaging or independence of your high school junior. In later adolescence, hormones move toward equilibrium, self-concept gains more solid ground, and maturity seems possible after all! Appreciate the progress, and remember that 11th graders are still in the thick of adolescence.

There are fluctuations - one day self-assured, insightful, responsible; the next, childish, self-centered, temperamental. These flip-flops cause confusion and frustration *for all*. Add to this the pressures, expectations, unknowns of the high school years - you see how your teen's self-esteem might need repairs.

The powerful influence of self-concept cannot be overstated. Teens who feel good about themselves are more likely to make positive decisions - about school, friends, relationships, sex, drugs - whatever! The parent's role in nurturing a child's self-esteem is critical.

This is not about pumping up your kids, or heaping empty praise on them. It's not about comparing your child to others: "I think you're better than... stronger than... smarter than..." This level of "support" won't serve to build

true self-esteem. To be of real assistance, help your child acknowledge personal value, abilities and strengths.

Ask your teen to complete the following: "*I like myself because...*" S/he is to talk for a full minute, listing as many reasons as s/he can. Then, you feed back what you heard: "*You like yourself because...*"

Don't be surprised if your teen feels self-conscious or runs out of things to say before time is up. You may find yourself prompting, even *adding* items not mentioned by your child. They may be qualities you value in your child that s/he overlooks or doesn't believe are so. Discuss why self-acknowledgment/ appreciation is uncomfortable... and why it's so *important*.

Adolescence can at times be brutal on a young person's self-concept. Point out the growth you've noticed. When a reprimand is in order, focus on the *behavior* as unacceptable, *not the person*. **Tell your child often, "I love you."**

Help your teen process negative comments. Your daughter's friend says, "Dana, you jerk! You never keep your eye on the ball." Teach Dana to turn it around and say *what's really true*: "My concen-

tration may not be as good today as it usually is. That doesn't make me a jerk."

Your child may find it awkward to practice correcting negative comments, but it's important. **The more we quietly accept negative comments and personal slams, the more we come to hold them as true.**

Help your teenager deal with disappointments in ways that promote learning and acceptance. If your son doesn't get the lead in the school play, acknowledge his hurt and commend his effort. Help him plan for improving his skills.

Urge your child to repeat image building statements (affirmations) everyday, such as: "I'm successful." "I like myself." "I have a good attitude."

Work with your child to set short term goals at which s/he can be successful; give him/her the freedom to make decisions, take on responsibilities, make mistakes... and process the results of each. With each success comes higher self-esteem. And **with higher self-esteem comes greater opportunity for a positive, fulfilling life.**

Not a bad idea to promote to your kids.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 11 - No. 5

Yet Another Challenge

As usual, you checked the pockets of Mike's pants before washing them. This time you found a condom. Rushing off for school, Sara dropped her purse and out fell a brochure marked **Planned Parenthood Teen Birth Control Clinic**.

How do parents respond to the suspicion that their 17-year-old might be having sex? What should they do? And not do?

First: *breathe* ... slowly, deeply... taking time to move beyond the shock, anger - whatever the initial, gut reaction is. Don't attempt a discussion when you're upset.

Consider the facts: Mike has a condom. Is it to use or for show to impress his peers? The telltale "O" imprinted on a young man's wallet or back pocket is considered a mark of sexual experience. How much truth there is in that is anybody's guess.

And the brochure listing teen clinic services, hours, cost... maybe Sara got it in class the day a guest speaker talked about teen pregnancy. Maybe it's for a writing assignment. Or... maybe Sara *is* having sex.

If you ever face this dilemma, don't leap to conclusions, but don't ignore the situation either.

Take time to identify what you know vs. what you suspect. This lets you calm yourself, gather your thoughts, and do what must come next: talk with your teen.

Both parents (if possible) should first agree on the messages they want to present. Then share your suspicions and concerns - *honestly* - with your teen. Emphasize the values, attitudes and expectations you hold about teens and sex. **Ask your teenager what s/he believes, and take those opinions to heart - even though you may disagree.**

If your suspicions are correct, avoid comments like "I'm crushed!" or "How could you do this?" Blame, guilt, etc., are damaging. **Focus on the behavior.** If you think teen sex is inappropriate or unwise or risky, say that - or whatever you believe. This is far different from condemning the child.

Ultimately teens make their own decisions about sex. Parents can only do their best to inform, offer guidance and share values. If your teen *is* sexually active, ask that s/he examine the reasons and circumstances surrounding that choice. Discuss the relationship and level of commitment. Why has sex become part of it? Is there pressure for sex? Does s/he see any drawbacks? Explore possible

implications. **Consistently reaffirm that you love and support your child even if you disagree with the behavior.**

Resist the urge to forbid your teenager to see his/her partner again. Rarely effective, this merely drives their relationship underground. Ultimatums and threats breed resentment, anger, resistance - none of which serve the most important purpose: keeping communication open so you can help your child make wise decisions.

Though they may not approve of the behavior, parents still have a responsibility to help children deal with the choice to be sexually active. Information is critical - about the emotional consequences and risks, about pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, contraception... *just as the sharing of feelings and values is critical.*

In the end, your teen may continue to be sexually active. Then again, s/he may see the value of your arguments and choose to reconsider. Either way, the sharing and guidance which is so essential to your child's well-being can continue only if open communication is maintained. Concentrate on that goal, and you just might be amazed at the results.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 12 - No. 1

The Value of Values

There's all this talk about teaching "values" around sexuality: sharing family "values"; respecting that the "values" of others may be different; acting on one's personal "values."

Just what are these things called "values" anyway? Where do they come from? Do they change over time, and if so, does that mean they weren't really "values" in the first place?

Values are personal truths upon which we base our life decisions. We may not recall consciously choosing our values: they just seem to be there, influencing our attitudes and behaviors.

With such vagueness about values, we can have difficulty explaining them to children. Parents may have little experience defining or examining their values around sexuality, so attitudes and beliefs may be passed on without much active discussion.

It's important to revisit our core beliefs from time to time; to clarify, alter if necessary, and reaffirm what is true for us. This can be scary, since it forces us to examine what we say we value and what we truly value. It also makes us face how well our behaviors match our beliefs. This process of

"e - value - ation" allows us to better guide our children in developing their own personal values about sexuality.

This process is healthy - and sometimes painful - as people examine long accepted codes. Families confront the possibility that the kids' values may not always line up with the folks. And it's incredibly enriching to discover there is common ground.

We teach children values around sexuality through words, but perhaps more importantly by modeling behaviors we see as right and just. Media and peers also promote values (or lack of) in the messages they deliver.

Moving toward independence, teens need opportunities to question, examine, and test values. Then they can freely and consciously form their personal value system. This allows them to truly "own" their values - to have the conviction to live by them.

It's a difficult balance for parents: striving to support sons and daughters in choosing their own values, while at the same time offering input and guidance. It requires trust that children are capable of choosing values that will work well for them in their lives.

We can help our teens by communicating openly about issues

such as love, relationships, premarital sex, birth control, sexual orientation, abortion, pregnancy, parenting, sexually transmitted infections, etc. Parents *and* teens need the freedom to express to one another what they know, feel, value and expect around each of these issues.

The following exercise can help in clarifying values around sexuality. Parents can do it alone or with their teens: For each statement, explain why you agree, feel neutral, or disagree:

- *Premarital sex is wrong.*
- *Teens should have access to birth control without parental consent.*
- *Abortion should be legal.*
- *A career for married women is most acceptable after the children are older.*
- *If a 15-year-old becomes pregnant, she should place the baby for adoption.*
- *Gay and lesbian couples should have the freedom to adopt.*

Your 12th grader's decisions around sexuality will be greatly affected by the ability to clarify, express, affirm and act on personal values. These are skills which improve with practice. If parents encourage such practice within the safety of the family, they better prepare their teen for life beyond high school.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 12 - No. 2

What to Do?!

Teens may think the only choice to be made about sex is: "Should I or shouldn't I?" The reality is, sexual decision-making involves a lot more than merely deciding whether to have sex, and if so, when and with whom.

Life after high school brings increasing opportunities to decide about sex. If your family hasn't addressed this issue thoroughly, NOW IS THE TIME! Avoiding open discussion about sexual decisions only serves to leave young people unprepared.

For teens, it can be incredibly complicated... so many conflicting messages from "Just say 'no'" to "Go for it!" No wonder they're confused.

In fact, that's a good place to begin a conversation with your teen about this whole business of sexual decision-making. Consider using the following exercise:

You and your teen complete and discuss these statements:

About sexual intercourse,
my parents tell me _____
my friends tell me _____
my religion tells me _____
the media tells me _____
I believe _____

How do the messages differ? What conflict can this cause? How might the conflict be resolved? Who can assist? Repeat the process for several topics, including dating and relationships, pregnancy, birth control, abortion, living together outside of marriage, etc.

This isn't about who's right or wrong; it's about identifying and evaluating the range of sexual messages out there. Ultimately your teen must clarify what s/he truly believes. Only then can there be informed and thoughtful decision-making.

This exercise requires safety to address such personal issues. To create that safety, establish some agreements, for example:

1. Discussion is confidential.
2. You can speak honestly, without fear of consequence.
3. You have the right to speak without interruption.
4. You may pass any time.

(NOTE: Establish only those agreements which you and your teen will honor and follow. If you have difficulty with agreements, consider asking for assistance from a third party, for example, a family friend, counselor, etc.)

Remind your teen that "Your body belongs to you. You decide how to express yourself, sexually and otherwise."

"Right now, you have the ability to say 'yes' or 'no' to sexual activity, regardless of pressure you may feel from your peers, your parents - whoever - to make the decision they want you to make. Ultimately it's up to you. Whatever you decide, choose thoughtfully."

"Consider how you make your decisions. If it's by impulse, have you truly thought things through? If your judgment is clouded (by drugs, alcohol, stress, etc.), how might this affect your decisions? If you let someone else decide for you, do you risk going against what you really believe and feel? If you don't make and clearly express a decision, might this encourage someone else to step in and decide for you? If you evaluate options and then decide, how might that increase your power to make choices that are consistent with your personal values?"

Important decisions in life deserve thought, evaluation, and careful consideration. Help your teen appreciate that personal power, freedom and self-respect come from taking charge of one's life choices.

Sexual decision-making is a very big deal for teenagers today. What's sad is that most are totally unprepared for the challenge.

Your teen needn't be one of them.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 12 - No. 3

Cleaning Up the Myths

When my son John asked to talk to me about a friend he was worried about - a friend with a problem - I got worried. As a kid, whenever I was in trouble and needed answers, I never admitted I was the one with the problem. It was always, "I've got this 'friend,' and he's got this problem..."

"He thinks he might be gay, Dad," John continued.

"Who?" I almost *demanded*. I wanted to shout, "John, who are we *really* talking about here?" But I contained myself. I value the openness John and I share... on lots of issues, including sexuality. I didn't want to jeopardize that now.

"I don't want to say, Dad. But I need to talk about it. All I ever hear about gay people are crude jokes and negative comments. Some people are pretty hateful. Maybe they just don't understand. I don't understand... and I'm not sure what to do for my friend."

The tradition of condemning homosexuality is firmly embedded in our culture. Unfortunately, AIDS added fuel to the fire of homophobia - fear and hostility toward people who are gay or lesbian. The result has been even less tolerance.

Struggling to gain comfort with their own sexual development, teens are especially threatened by the subject of homosexuality. Yet they're intensely curious... about what it means to be gay; what "causes" it, how to tell if someone is gay, etc.

I told John all I knew about the subject, which I confess wasn't much. He was surprised to hear that many children and adolescents have some kind of sexual experience with persons of the same gender - whether it be "playing doctor," sexual touching... or strong feelings of attraction and sexual fantasies. Such experiences and feelings are common, normal, and not necessarily proof that one is gay.

"There are a lot of theories, John, but no one knows what 'causes' someone to be either homosexual or heterosexual. Evidence shows that being gay isn't a choice... rather it's a compelling, deeply held orientation. We may not understand... and we don't have to. Their relationships can be just as loving, genuine and fulfilling to them as ours can be to us."

"We also know that sexual orientation isn't contagious. Having a gay teacher, coach, or even a parent doesn't 'turn' someone gay."

I told John that I believe hatred and discrimination against gay

people are wrong. *Differences don't justify mistreatment.*

It turned out John really *was* asking about a friend. But what if he wasn't? I think of all those young people out there feeling confused, ashamed; alienated from their peers, alone with their secret; fearing rejection from their family and friends. And no one to talk to.

The existence of gay youth is often denied. Think about it... sex education, if it happens at all, is phrased almost exclusively in heterosexual terms. In avoiding open, honest discussion, we allow for continued misunderstanding, mistrust, fear, isolation. If we say nothing to our sons and daughters about this topic, that in itself speaks volumes.

So I encourage you, parents... John, his friend, and all those like him encourage you... to speak with your teens about sexual orientation. The following books may be useful:

On Being Gay: Thoughts on Family, Faith and Love Brian McNaught

Now That You Know: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Their Gay and Lesbian Children Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 12 - No. 4

Take Care

Even those committed to a healthy lifestyle often neglect their sexual health. For example, how many women are diligent about their annual Pap and pelvic exam - or practice monthly breast self exam? How many men perform (or even know about) testicular self-exam? Yet, testicular cancer is one of the most common cancers in males aged 15-34. Learning how to examine the testes properly can be a life saving skill.

Neglect of sexual health is an extension of discomfort about sexuality in general. Embarrassment around touching, examining or paying attention to our sexual anatomy contributes to poor health habits. These include reluctance to practice good reproductive health care (routine exams, treatment for sexually transmitted infections, appropriate use of protection).

As you promote positive behaviors around sexuality with your family, include support for sexual health.

By grade 12, young women should be prepared for their Pap smear and pelvic exam. (*Parents: attending to this does not imply that you are encouraging sexual activity.*) It's recommended that

young women have an annual gynecological exam beginning with the onset of sexual intercourse, or by age 18.

Discussing both the value and specifics of this medical exam with your daughter can ease anxiety. It also helps establish a positive attitude toward sexual health.

Explain that the purpose of an annual exam is to see if the reproductive organs are healthy, and to detect any problems early on. The Pap smear is a simple test in which a sample of cells from the cervix (neck of the uterus) is examined for irregularities. Since Pap smears first became available as a screening tool in 1941, deaths due to cervical cancer have fallen 70%! Annual Paps are one of the most important ways a woman can care for her sexual health.

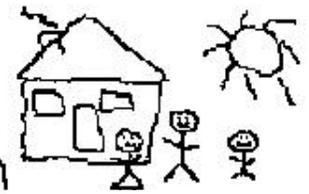
The first annual exam can have tremendous impact on attitudes toward and comfort with sexual health care. Parents help create a more positive experience by preparing their daughter. **“Pelvic Exam: Your Key to Good Health”** is an excellent Planned Parenthood pamphlet, designed to inform and support young women in safeguarding their reproductive health.

Help your daughter appreciate that she can take charge of these health issues. Encourage her to track her menstrual cycle, noting any problems or changes. Promote monthly breast self-exam (BSE). Breast cancer affects 1 in 9 women; with BSE, a young woman may detect a potentially dangerous breast lump early on.

Young men should be taught about the importance of testicular self-exam (TSE) for the early detection of testicular cancer. Studies show that most young men know little about TSE, yet have significant fears about contracting testicular cancer. Found early and treated promptly, there is an excellent chance for cure. But the mildness of early symptoms, ignorance, fear, and denial are factors which may cause adolescents to delay seeking medical attention.

Many of these same factors also keep adolescents (even adults) from seeking necessary medical attention for other sexual health issues such as unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, etc. It doesn't have to be that way. Educate and support your teen in all areas of sexuality - including sexual health.

There's No Place Like Home... ...for Sex Education



Grade 12 - No. 5

A Letter of Love

Dear Kevin,

You're growing into a handsome, bright, and sexy young man. Watching you fills us with love and pride - plus, we confess, a bit of worry. But then, do parents *ever* stop worrying about their children?

We know that you are as amazed (and probably confused) about your emerging sexuality as we sometimes are. It's difficult to accept you as a "sexy young man" - and frankly, hard to ignore. As you go through the process of understanding yourself as a sexual person, please think about the beliefs and values we have shared with you over the years. We hope you will consider them carefully.

Know that you can have strong sexual feelings, and choose not to act on them. Take the time you need to make wise choices that are right for you. You don't have to have sexual intercourse because "everybody's doing it," or because peers are pressuring you to "be a man." There's a lot to be said for waiting, you know. Your decisions about sex are yours and yours alone. Whatever you choose, choose responsibly.

We expect you to be thoughtful,

respectful and honorable in your sexual decision-making, Kevin. Love and sex are not one and the same... don't confuse them, or misrepresent them to another.

We expect that you will make sexual decisions which are positive and affirming - not ones which exploit either yourself or others. We recognize and respect that some of your beliefs may differ from ours. We trust that you have taken the time to carefully sort out what you value and hold to be true. We also trust that you will act on your values - for only then will you feel self-respect.

We hope that you will ask us for help if you find yourself confused, hurt or stuck over any issue you cannot resolve - whether it be related to sex, friends, school... whatever.

Remember we love you very much, Kevin, and are proud to be your parents.

Love, Mom and Dad

Kevin is a high school senior. What a landmark. So much growth and development under his belt - and so much more to go. His father and I recognize that this is his final year home with us - he's off to college next fall. As we prepare to launch this young man into the world, on his own,

we remember all the talks we had - or didn't have - or wished we'd had with Kevin about sex. We know the value and importance of such communication continue well beyond the high school years. Sexuality is such a complex issue, at any age.

The chapter on Kevin's high school years is closing. That doesn't guarantee that rational thought about sexuality, appropriate behavior and responsible choices are automatically cemented in place. On the contrary, in many ways, we know some of the greatest challenges lie ahead - on the college campus and beyond. We want Kevin to be prepared.

So we wrote this letter - to let Kevin know that, among other things, we want sex to be something we can always discuss in this family. It takes extra effort to talk with a 12th grader about sex. There are so many shades of gray, "what if's," and differing opinions. Emotions run high, discomfort sets in.

Sometimes it's easier to just forget it, cross your fingers, and hope you've already covered it all. But we didn't want to do that. We wanted to take one more opportunity to prepare our special young man for his journey of separation and independence.

So we wrote this letter.