

## Tips for talking with children about sexuality

By Debra W Haffner, with Dr Robert Needlman

Here are the ten most important communication tips for parents on teaching children about sexuality.

- Reward your child's questions. Instead of asking, 'Why are you asking that?' or brushing off the subject by saying, 'We'll talk about this when you're older', try instead, 'Honey, I'm so glad you asked me that'. Be happy that your child feels comfortable enough to talk to you about sexuality issues.
- Don't wait for your child to start the conversation. Many parents put off talking to their children about sexuality on the assumption that when a child wants to know something, he'll ask. But some children are reluctant to begin these dialogues; others simply aren't the type who ask a lot of questions. Do you wait for your child to ask about your religious faith, personal safety, and other important topics before discussing them? The answer, more than likely, is no – and sexuality should be no different. It is a parent's responsibility to introduce the topic, little by little. Your child may never ask, but he still needs to know.
- It's OK if you don't have an answer. If you don't know the answer to your child's question, say so and explain that you will find out and get back to him. If your child is school age or older, you can look it up together. And if you find that you've given your child misinformation, don't hesitate to go back and tell your child you'd like to try to give him a better answer now that you've had time to think over your discussion.
- It's OK to feel uncomfortable. Many parents feel awkward talking to their children about sexuality because their parents didn't talk to them about these issues. There's no reason why you can't – or shouldn't – explain this to your child. You can say, 'I'm not used to talking about sex because Grandma didn't talk to me. But I think it's so important that I want us to do so, and it will get easier as we go along'.
- Look for teaching opportunities that arise naturally and provide a good venue to talk about some aspect of sexuality or other important topic. They might be a scene in a TV show or movie, the actions of a character in a book that you both have read, or the simple instance of your teenager getting ready for a school dance. Teaching opportunities like these give you the opportunity to provide little bits of information and to share your own family values without having to sit your child down for an uncomfortable series of formal talks.
- Listen to your child. Try hard to really hear his concerns. Find out what he already knows about the topic you are discussing. Although your fifth-grade son's crush may seem silly to you, it's very important to him. Your willingness to listen during the elementary-school years sets the stage for when your child is an adolescent and has to make decisions about dating and sexual relationships.
- Facts are not enough. Yes, your child needs to be educated about reproduction and puberty, but he also needs to hear your family values. He can learn facts from school and books; only you can teach him your values. Think through the messages you want to convey to your child about sexuality.

- Educate your sons as well as your daughters. In many homes, parents educate their daughters about puberty and menstruation, but assume that boys will pick up what they need from their friends. Your son needs sexuality education from his parents, too.
- It is the job of both parents to teach children about sexuality. In many homes, it is Mum's job to talk about sexuality. In other homes, the mother talks to the daughters, while the father talks to his sons. But children need to hear the adult viewpoint of both genders. It teaches your children that men and women can talk about sexuality together, an important skill in adulthood. In single-parent homes or homes with gay or lesbian parents, it's a good idea to ask for help from close relatives or friends of the other gender so that your child learns to talk about sexuality with both women and men.
- Talk about the joys of sexuality. It is so easy, when talking about sexuality with children, to focus on the negative consequences of unprotected sexual activity. This is especially true when they are teenagers. But your child also deserves to know that his sexuality is a wonderful gift, and that expressing sexual feelings in a responsible manner can be a vital and rewarding part of an adult relationship. Be sure to share your own family values about responsible healthy sexuality.

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Rated ★★★★★ (8 ratings)

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#### More to explore

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- ▶ Raising sexually healthy children
- ▶ Creating a sexually healthy family
- ▶ Childhood sex play
- ▶ Teaching the parts of the body to young children

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Last reviewed  
15-05-2006

#### Acknowledgements

Adapted from From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children by Debra W. Haffner.