Be an ASKABLE PARENT

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DO NOT REPRODUCE

How to Talk with Your Child about Sex and Sexual Health
Children learn their values by constantly watching the people who care for them—by seeing what you do and how you act. Children begin learning about sex and their sexuality when they are infants, and they are sensitive to a parent’s silent signals. By the time children start school, they already know a lot about human sexuality, especially their own.

This booklet is about ways you can teach your child about sexuality. Sexuality education is not just about sex. Sexuality education includes sex, but also the roles, behaviors, and values people associate with being a healthy man or woman. Sexuality is both physical and emotional. You can see it in everything we do: the clothes we wear, the way we walk, the way we talk, how we show affection, and in many everyday events. Good sexuality education is based on the idea that loving and caring parents actively discover a child’s needs for information and then find ways to fill those needs. Even adolescents in their mid-teens are still learning from you. (Yes, you can talk to your teenager about sex and their sexuality!)

Good communication lets you influence your child. For example, many children are afraid to talk to a parent about natural body functions and whether they are “normal” or not. Research shows that positive communication between parents and their children can help young people establish individual values and make healthy decisions.

A failure to communicate can result in children making uninformed choices that can ultimately lead to unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections to include HIV/AIDS, even sexual exploitation.

We believe that sex education from parents can delay sexual activity and avert problems later on. Perhaps most important, we believe that good communication will help you understand your child and help you and your child become closer.
The American Sexual Health Association (ASHA) strongly believes that sexuality education begins at home and that a parent is a child’s most important sexuality educator.

ASHA feels that children need:
- an askable parent
- a clear set of values
- accurate information
- a strong sense of self-worth
- decision-making and communication skills

We do NOT believe that talking about sex or sexual health encourages sex. In fact, studies show that informed teenagers are less likely to have sex.

The ABCs of SEXUALITY COMMUNICATION

BE ASKABLE

Does your child feel it’s OK to talk with you about sex? If not, have you thought about who will answer your child’s questions? Only you can tell your child that it’s OK to ask you questions—that you’re askable.

Here are some traits of an askable parent. Check off phrases that describe you. An askable parent...

- shows respect, value, and love for children.
- realizes that every difficult situation is not a crisis.
- wants communication, but doesn’t expect to have all the answers.
- knows the most important part of communication is listening.
- doesn’t laugh when a child asks a question, even in reaction to the child’s cuteness.
- doesn’t expect to be perfect, and knows that admitting mistakes is a valuable lesson for the child.
- is sometimes embarrassed by questions about sex, but acknowledges the discomfort and explains it to the child.

Children are more likely to talk to an approachable parent. If you check all seven answers, you are very askable.
Discover and explain why talking about sexuality may be difficult.

There are many reasons why parents hesitate to talk about sexuality. A parent may...

◆ feel embarrassed or lack confidence in answering questions.
◆ be afraid that talking about sexuality will encourage sexual activities.
◆ feel uncomfortable thinking of children as sexual beings.
◆ think the child is not ready for the information.
◆ not have thought through or talked about family values and beliefs.

All these feelings are very normal! Accept whatever discomfort you experience when discussing sex and sexuality.

Consider what might happen if you do not talk with your child.

If a child doesn’t learn about sexuality from a parent, the child will learn about sexuality elsewhere—from friends, television, magazines and other sources. This information can be incorrect, confusing, and may not agree with your beliefs. Research shows that uninformed children are at greater risk of early sexual activity, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), pregnancy, sexual exploitation, and abuse.

Focus on your goals.

It’s okay to be uncomfortable talking about sexuality, the purpose of these conversations with your child is to:

◆ answer questions and eliminate fears;
◆ reflect on your family’s values and feelings; and
◆ build the child’s self-confidence.
Plan how to respond to questions.
Parents who are uncomfortable talking about sexuality may find it helpful to plan what you will say and how they might answer your child’s questions.

When your child asks a question or does something that triggers a teachable moment, you may find this three step response useful:

1. Listen to make sure you know what the child is asking. Ask your child, “Do you mean...?” or “Do you want to know about...?”
2. Think about why the child is asking. Is your child trying to:
   ◆ check a fact?
   ◆ make sure he or she is normal?
   ◆ test your knowledge?
   ◆ satisfy curiosity?
3. After you’ve decided what to say, answer the question asked directly. Try to focus on what your child asked—you don’t need to go into more detail than your child wants or needs at that moment.

Respond immediately to your child’s need to know.
Even if your child asks a question at a difficult time, it is better to answer right away, if only briefly. You can always resume the discussion later when you have collected your thoughts or when you have more privacy.

Be sensitive to your expressions and gestures.
The way you answer a question is sexuality education, too. Don’t forget to smile, and remember that a good sense of humor can help communication.

Take the initiative, if necessary.
If, by age six, your child isn’t asking questions, it’s up to you to find moments to begin talking about sexuality issues. The earlier you begin communicating with your child, the easier it will be.

Get and give support.
Talk with other parents and see how they’re doing. Find out about sexuality education program opportunities in your community.