Be an Askable Parent

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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.

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.
BUILD BRIDGES

These techniques have helped other parents improve communication with their children.

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.

Teachable Moments

It’s easier to teach a child who is ready to learn. For example, if you see your child touching his or her genitals, or if you and your child watch a sexual scene on television, you have an opportunity to teach your child about sexuality.

Teachable moments happen everywhere; in stores, in a movie, at the park, or in the car. Don’t worry about the reaction of other people.

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 asks— you don’t need to go into more details 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.
If you have any concerns about your child’s development, talk with your healthcare provider, knowledgeable family members, or other parents. Reach out to others for information, understanding, and ideas on how to maintain open communication with your child. Support from others can help you and your child through the awkwardness and uncertainty of dealing with sexuality education.

CONTINUE TO LEARN

Anticipate your child’s questions by learning the stages of sexual development.

Behaviors vary widely, but the events listed below show the general process of sexual development during childhood. Some of these phases are not as obvious as others. You may not know exactly when your child passes through a stage or exactly what your child learns. But you can prepare for the “visible” stages.

FROM BIRTH TO THREE YEARS, CHILDREN...

◆ learn or don’t learn the importance of physical contact (closeness, cuddling, stroking, holding).
◆ learn about trust and intimacy through interactions with a parent.
◆ explore the physical world, including their bodies.
◆ learn parental attitudes about body functions and genitals during toilet training.
◆ learn to identify with male and female adult roles.
◆ may reject clothing (between ages one and two).
◆ realize that they are boys or girls and learn the difference.
◆ discover sexual feelings. Boys have erections and girls experience fluid in the vagina.
◆ are curious about all parts of their bodies and, by eight months, their penises or vaginas.
◆ rock and perform pelvic thrusting.
◆ may begin to show affection or sexual interest in each other, such as wrestling, hugging, kissing, or looking at each other’s genitals.
◆ may express curiosity about a parent’s body.
**A Typical Situation**

Your three-year-old child touches his/her genitals.

Why is your child doing this?
- It feels good. It reduces anxiety.

What message do you want to send?
- Masturbation is OK but is private.

Possible answer:
- I know that feels good and you don’t have to stop. I just want you to do it in private because it’s personal.

**FROM FOUR TO EIGHT YEARS, CHILDREN...**
- develop positive or negative feelings about their bodies and develop attitudes about the bodies of others.
- continue to learn what it is to be and act like boys and girls.
- engage in non-sexual childhood “sex play” such as “doctor and nurse” or “let’s play house” games.
- learn sex words, but usually don’t know their meanings.
- develop an ability to give and share affection.
- learn a sense of modesty.
- continue to discover self-pleasuring.
- tend to be interested in reproduction, pregnancy, and birth.
- get very interested in adult and parental sexual behavior.
- may show strong affection toward the parent of the other sex.

**A Typical Situation**

Your five-year-old daughter asks, “Mommy, how come you have breasts and I don’t?”

Why is your child asking this?
- She may need assurance that she is normal. She may be curious about how girls become women.

What message do you want to send?
- I’m glad my daughter feels comfortable asking me questions like this. This is a good time to explain how girls become women.
Possible answer:
I’m glad you asked me. As you grow up, your body will change - in lots of ways. One way is that your breasts will grow as you become a woman.

FROM NINE TO TWELVE YEARS, CHILDREN...
◆ may be exposed to sex education in school.
◆ develop a sense of morality.
◆ continue to masturbate.
◆ show signs of puberty.

Puberty is a stage of development when sexual maturity and reproductive capability begins. The first stages of puberty usually occur in the order listed below, but these physical and mental changes can begin earlier or later. A child’s weight provides the most accurate indicator of when a change is likely to take place, but a parent needs to be alert for signs of change.

Stages of Puberty in Girls
◆ Around age 10 (or about 68 pounds) a growth spurt occurs; ovaries begin to secrete sex hormones.
◆ Around age 11 breast enlargement begins; body shape gradually rounds.
◆ Around age 12 soft, downy pubic hair and some underarm hair appears.
◆ Around age 13 (or about 106 pounds) menstruation starts. There may be an inconsistent and irregular discharge at first. Pubic hair appears.

Stages of Puberty in Boys
◆ Around age 11 boys may have a “fat period.”
◆ Around age 12 penis and scrotum begin to increase in size; spontaneous erections occur more often.
◆ Around age 13 pubic hair appears, followed by growth of underarm and facial hair. Ejaculation and wet dreams possible.
◆ Around age 14 voice changes occur; weight and height may increase.
FROM TWELVE TO SIXTEEN YEARS...
Adolescents are very concerned about body development, sexuality, self-esteem, their changing relationships with parents and friends, and their need to establish independence.

In talking with teens, the goal is to give accurate information and help them discover what they feel. In doing so, they can take responsible control of their lives, particularly their sexual lives. As they approach adolescence, young people need to know more about:

◆ The way their bodies will change.
◆ The nature of relationships, between friends, men and women, men and men, women and women, themselves and a parent.
◆ The ups and downs in life, including depression and, sometimes, thoughts of suicide. Your askability is an invaluable asset at this stage. Crises about sexuality and relationships can set off depression and anxiety.
◆ Their evolving sexuality. Now they are old enough to discuss the implications of what they think, feel, and do. Young adolescents may feel pressure to act as if they know everything even when they are totally lost. Firm guidance from you and good communication with you will help your child. By postponing sexual activity your teenager decreases the risk of sexually transmitted infections, and improves the odds against teen pregnancy. With your help, your teenager will develop and maintain a high level of self-esteem and make responsible decisions into adulthood. For those teenagers who are sexually active, your willingness to talk to them about all aspects of their lives remains important. Even if you prefer that they behave differently, make sure they know you care about their health and well-being.
◆ Sexual orientation. Teens are interested in the specifics of heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality. They may discover their sexual orientation at this age.
The importance of good sexual health. Adolescents should know about doctor–patient confidentiality, and why it’s important that their doctor knows about their sexual habits. Make sure your child understands safer sex behaviors that reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. For girls, it may be helpful to discuss pelvic examinations before the first visit to the gynecologist. You may want to talk about common physical health concerns of adolescents. Acne, for example, is a major cause of anxiety and your support can make life easier.

A Typical Situation

A teen may ask, “When is it OK to have sex?”

Why is the teen asking?
Your teen might be asking about a long-term possibility, or might want approval for the short-term. Maybe he or she wants general information.

What is the message you want to send?
You respect and care about your teen and want to help him or her to know your feelings and have the information necessary to make the best choices possible.

Possible answer:
I’m very glad you asked me. I would ask myself several questions if I were thinking about having sex, like: “Do I really care about this person and does this person really care about me? Am I really ready to have sex and do I really want to? Does my partner really want to? Have we agreed on a reliable way to prevent sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy?

I feel that two people should be able to talk about these things before they have sex. I’d ask myself if I could handle the possible consequences by myself. Every year, a million girls get pregnant and millions of teens get sexually transmitted infections.
I think sex is a complicated and important part of life, so let’s talk about it some more. Let’s talk about what you want in a relationship.

Opening a Conversation with a Teen

Starting an intimate conversation with a teen can be difficult if you’ve not talked much about intimate subjects before. It’s important not to invade a teen’s privacy, and it may be easier to start a conversation by talking about a television character, for example. Questions such as “How do you feel...?” allow for more conversation opportunities than questions that can be answered with a “yes” or a “no.”

Questions about your child’s friends are an excellent way to show that you’re interested in your child’s social life. By finding out what your child’s friends are doing, you have an opportunity to find out what your child thinks.

Children at this and all ages need to know that if they do something “wrong,” it is the behavior you object to, not them.

A SPECIAL WORD ABOUT TEENAGERS:
Parents of children 12-16 often worry that they may have missed their chance to educate their children about sexuality. Though teenagers may seem rebellious, they are often sensitive and sometimes very frightened. Since adolescence is a time of changes and choices, accurate information, active involvement and loving support from a parent can make a big difference.

The Next Steps

You can influence your child by listening, observing behavior and by talking with him or her. By providing up-to-date information, you give your child (and yourself) a chance to make informed decisions. The child with a strong, positive, proud sense of his or her sexuality will make careful, responsible decisions. And thanks to you, your child may well grow up to be an Askable Parent too!
Since 1914, the American Sexual Health Association (ASHA) has been dedicated to promoting the sexual health of individuals, families and communities by advocating sound policies and practices and educating the public, professionals and policy makers, in order to foster healthy sexual behaviors and relationships and prevent adverse health outcomes.

The American Sexual Health Association (ASHA) publishes this and other materials to provide a valuable resource for accurate medical information and emotional support for those affected by sexually transmitted infections.

www.ashasexualhealth.org
www.iwannaknow.org (for teens)
www.quierosaber.org (en español)
www.nccc-online.org

ASHA Customer Service: 800-783-9877
ashacustomerservice@ashasexualhealth.org

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