

How to Talk to Children about Sexuality

Each person is a sexual being with normal desires to be loved and touched. Although feelings about and experiences with sexuality may change as we age, all humans are sexual beings. It is essential to know that sexuality involves a lot more than just sexual activity. A person is still a sexual being even if they are not sexually active. Sexuality encompasses:

- our gender identity and orientation
- feelings of attraction
- the way(s) we choose to be intimate with others
- our personal body image
- our sense of right and wrong (i.e., values) and how this influences our behavior(s)

When is the best time to start these conversations?

It's never too late, but the earlier the better. Just don't try to "catch up" all at once. The most important thing is to be open and available whenever a child wants to talk.

What do we talk about and when?

Early childhood sexuality (birth – 3 years)

- Learns about love and trust through touching and holding
- Sucking (need for oral satisfaction)
- Spontaneous reflexive responses
 - males: erections of penis
 - females: vaginal lubrication
- Gender Identity develops (child knows "I am a boy" or "I am a girl")
- Sex role conditioning (boys and girls are treated differently)
- Exploration of own body (hands, feet, genitals)
- May enjoy nudity
- Toilet training
- Curiosity about differences between boys' and girls' bodies
- Curiosity about parents' bodies

Late childhood sexuality (4 – 8 years)

- Childhood sexual play (e.g. Doctor)
- Sex role learning: how to behave like a girl or boy
- Learns sex words: "bathroom vocabulary"
- Asks question about pregnancy and birth
- Begins to distinguish acceptable and unacceptable behavior
- Possibility of masturbation
- Becomes modest about own body
- Media influences understanding about male/female family roles

Early adolescent sexuality (9 – 11 years)

- Puberty begins (growth of genitals, breast development, etc.)
- Possibility of masturbation
- Closeness of same sex friends
- Possibility of body exploration with others

Adolescent sexuality (12 – 18 years)

- Puberty changes (physical and emotional) occur
- Menstruation or sperm production begins
- Possibility of masturbation
- Pleasure from kissing and touching
- Greater awareness of being sexually attracted to others
- Possibility of sexual activity
- Possibility of pregnancy or impregnating
- Possibility of contraception and safe sex conversations
- Strong need for independence

What do we do with all this?

Set good examples that show kids how our lives are enriched by our values.

- Reassure them that they're normal.
- Respect our kids' privacy as much as we value our own. Do not pry.
- Use correct names for sex organs and sexual behaviors.
- Take advantage of "teachable moments." A friend's pregnancy, neighborhood gossip, and TV shows.
- Be clear about our values and let kids know that others may have different values about sexuality.
- Give accurate, honest, short, and simple answers.
- Admit when we don't know an answer. We can help our kids find the answer in a book or on line
- Accept questions at face value. For example, "How old do you have to be to 'have sex?'" doesn't necessarily mean, "I'm thinking about having sex."
- Let our kids know that we're available, and make it a habit to share what we think and feel.
- Ask questions even if they don't — questions about what they think and what they know.
- Figure out what we want to say about our own feelings and values before we speak.
- Let our body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice support what we say with words.
- Get to know the world in which our kids live. What pressures are they feeling? What do they consider normal?

