

Age Appropriate Conversations for Parents and Kids

Part I-Never Too Young Communicating with Toddlers about Sex and Sexuality

I'll bet Charles Dickens never thought about sex when he wrote, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Yet it does seem to capture the relationship between sexuality, parents and their children today. It is the best of times because never before have we had access to so much information and research about sexuality, so much help for parents in talking to their children about sex and such a consensus about helping children deal with their sexual development and education. It is the worst of times because never before have there been so many hyper sexualized images swirling around our children and young adults. Never before have we asked young people to come of age in that reality, and never have the stakes been so high. So, let's take a deep breath and over the course of the next three months explore children's sexual development, and what we, as parents, can do to help them develop healthy attitudes toward sex?

Do You Remember...?

The best beginning is to start by looking at our own development. If you can remember what it was like for you growing up and learning about sex, you will be able to better identify your child's needs. Take stock of the messages and information you received from your parents about sex. Often these are the messages and emotional underpinning that we bring to any discussions about sex with our own children. Take a moment and ask yourself the following questions.

What messages and information about sex were given to me?

What did my mother tell me about sex?

What did my father tell me about sex?

What were some of the myths or misunderstandings I had about sex?

What do I wish I had known then that I know now?

Did those misunderstandings ever put me at risk?

Answering these questions will help put you in touch with what your child may be thinking or feeling. Your child may be having the same kinds of questions, feeling the same confusion, and they may be feeling the same isolation that you may have felt. Conversely, if you had a particularly open and positive relationship about sex with your parents, then remember how powerful that felt and remember how confident that made you feel. Whatever your experience has been, use those emotions and information as a motivating factor in beginning to talk to your kids about sex.

Why Now

Why do we need to talk to young children, from birth to five, about sex? We are *all* sexual beings and our sexual development begins at birth and ends at death. It is important for parents to be an active participant in this development at a very early age. Parents have a greater opportunity to influence children's attitudes about their sexuality during the early childhood years than in any subsequent age period. Children from birth to five are learning a lot about their sexuality and parents are laying the groundwork for future discussions about sex.

How Does it All Work?

What is happening developmentally to children from 0-5 that impacts their sexual development, and what can we as parents do to help? Very young children begin at this age to explore their body. Their body is new to them and they are trying to figure out how it all fits together and how it all works. A baby is lying on the changing table and suddenly its toes float into view. They are grabbed, held, sucked and cuddled by your baby. The baby is getting a lot of non-verbal information at this point as to what is pleasurable and what isn't. Your reaction to their pleasure even at these early stages will be important. Encourage exploration and provide your baby with as much positive touch as possible. By two years, children are beginning to develop a positive or negative attitude about their bodies. How does it feel to be touched? Is touch a positive or negative experience? Do people look at me and smile or frown? Am I loved or not? Is it ok to touch some parts of my body and not others? Again, in the early years, this is all non-verbal, but later, as your child develops language, words become increasingly important.

Children also start to experience genital pleasures by two years old. As they explore their bodies, they become aware that it is pleasurable to touch their own genitals. This is usually much more evident in boys because it is easier for them to discover and then explore their genitals, but girls are by no means far behind. By five, a child has probably learned to masturbate. For parents this is often a difficult time, and it is possibly the first time you and your child are discussing something of an obvious sexual nature. It is an important time for parents to help children to learn about appropriate behavior in public and private. Help your child to understand the difference between these two concepts and that masturbation is something that is private. At this age, masturbation is *only* an issue if it is getting in the way of your child's other interests or if he or she is not confining this activity to a private time and space.

The Name Game

In the early years, children are at a very concrete level. They are very interested in organizing and naming body parts. As language develops, children need a vocabulary to deal with all body parts if they are going to be able to communicate their needs. So, by five most children can name their hands, feet, legs, knees, cheeks, nose, hair and have played many a game of "Simon Says" to practice naming or categorizing all of their body parts. But, are there body parts that aren't named? Or is a euphemism used? Does the

penis become a “wiener” and a vagina becomes a “cootchie”? Help your child to learn the proper names for all of their body parts including their sexual body parts.

By 5 years old, children become very curious about gender and body differences. They have begun to characterize not only their own body parts but also those of the opposite sex. Children of this age should be able to use the correct terms for *all* of the sexual body parts of both male and female. Just like it is important that a child know, and can point to their knee or wrist when it hurts, it is also important that a child can do the same for their sexual body parts because of sickness, injury, or abuse.

Parents can be working to help their children develop a positive attitude about their bodies and can begin to give children control over those bodies by giving them a vocabulary as well as the positive attitudes that they will need to protect and enjoy themselves. If you can't name it and you feel bad about it, then you can't protect it or nurture it.

Boys Are Blue and Girls Are Pink

Over the course of the first five years, children develop a strong sense of identity about what they are, either a boy or a girl, and what it means to be a boy or a girl. By the end of this developmental stage, both boys and girls establish a firm belief that they are either male or female and have developed attitudes about what it means to be a boy or a girl. Parents can help their children broaden their perspective on what it means to be a boy or girl. Often adults, society and the media can give limiting messages to children about appropriate behaviors and roles for a boy and girl.

The Question!

By age five, after your child has mastered the naming of their body parts, they begin to become very interested in how things happen. They begin to ask themselves and you the process question of “Where did I come from?” I suggest answering the question in a strait forward, honest, age-appropriate manor. Check in with your child after a short answer to see if you have answered the question. It might be that “you came from mommies uterus” is all the answer they want right now. But soon they will want to know more about the whole process of birth, including how a baby gets out of mommies uterus and also how a baby gets in.

Questions about sex should be answered in the same way that any other question would be answered. Use simple language and answer the question when it is asked. This will give children the information they are looking for and will let them know that they can always ask their parents questions and they will be answered. The most important part of dealing with preschool sexuality is to create an atmosphere in which children are comfortable asking questions and in which kids feel good about themselves.

Help is available. You can call Planned Parenthoods Help line at 1-866-600-6886 or go to our website at www.pprsr.org and go to the “ask an educator” section. At both places you can request a free copy of our booklet “Sex Education at Home.” There are also other links and help for parents on the website.

Part II-We Need to Talk—About Sex

In the last section we began to explore children's sexual development and what we as parents can do to help them develop healthy, responsible attitudes toward sex. We recognized that we are all sexual beings and that our sexual development begins at birth and ends at death. We also discussed a child's sexual development from birth to five year of age and how we could take advantage of that development to help our children gain an age-appropriate understanding of their bodies. Let's continue on now and look at sexual development from six to twelve and think about how we can help our children through this important part of their lives.

What's going on?

Children from age 6 through 12 go through incredible changes. They are moving from a time of almost complete dependence to a time of increasing independence. They are becoming individuals with likes and dislikes. They are developing friendships and beginning to move out into the world and are beginning to develop an identity different from their parents. During this timeframe, they are learning how to manage themselves in the world and this experience lays the groundwork for how they will manage themselves throughout their lives.

Developing Relationships

Children from 5 to 8 have strong same gender friendships. This is the time that the boys tend to group together and the girls do the same. They are getting information about what it means to be a boy or girl from their peers, independent of their parents. They are also beginning to learn how to manage friendships. This can be a bumpy time as children learn about loyalty and fitting in. Remember, how it felt when you were part of a group and accepted and how it felt when you were left out of the group and felt rejected. Children often rotate friendships on a daily or hourly basis all in attempt to manage themselves as independent and social beings.

Developing Independence

Before age 5, the child's parents are the center of the universe but after age 5 other influences begin to become important as children begin to go to school and move outside of the protected security of the family. Peer influences come into play and children begin

to conform to peer group style of dress and speech that is different from their parents. This process culminates in adolescents when the child is beginning to move to adulthood. So although parents still maintain a huge influence over their children during this time frame they must learn to share that stage with other outside influences.

Developing Control

From 9 to 12 years of age, children experience emotional ups and downs. There is an expressed need for privacy that often results in locked bathroom and bedroom doors. They begin to develop romantic crushes possibly on a teacher or other young adult in their social circle. They are strongly influenced by peer group pressure. They have sexual or romantic fantasies and they are beginning to face decision-making about becoming sexually active. This doesn't mean that they are having sex or even consciously deciding about becoming sexually active, but it does mean that they are getting a lot of information that they will use later on when they are faced with a decision about sex. Research shows that if you are interested in making adolescents more responsible when it comes to sexual activity, then this is the age group you should be targeting with information. These children are learning how they will go about controlling their lives.

How Can Parents Help using “Teachable Moments”

Parents at this point are becoming influencers on and not dictators of their children. Parents want to encourage dialogue and discussion between themselves and their children and one of the best ways to do this is to use what are called “teachable moments.”

Teachable moments happen all around us and, once they happen, a parent helps a child understand a new piece of information or helps a child clarify a value they might hold by asking the child about that situation. It can be as simple as watching a television show with your child and instead of both watching it passively, ask your child about what they saw on the screen. For example, the television shows Friends, Will and Grace and MTV all have sexual content. Get in the habit of asking your child when sex comes up if your child understands what is going on or how they feel about what they have just seen. In that way, you can make sure they understood the terms or situations that were presented. You can also ask them if they agreed with what they saw or, if given the same situation what would they have done differently. A lot of information can be passed between parent and child without it seeming to be a lecture. Not only will you be communicating with your child about information but you will be communicating to that child that you are interested in and value their opinion.

Another example of a teachable moment for young children, is in the movie the Lion King by Disney. Most of us watched that movie with our children and never thought that this could be a teachable moment in our children's lives. But, remember the relationship between Scar, the evil uncle and Simba. That was an example of an exploitive

relationship. Discussing or questioning that relationship could give your child important information. Why did Simba run away, at the urging of his uncle, after his father's death? Was someone older deceiving someone younger? Was Simba facing his problems or running away from them? Why didn't Simba come back and talk to his mother about what had happened? These are large issues but issues that will become more and more important as your children grow and move out into the world. You can explore these issues with your child through teachable moments. You can use this tool as you help your child develop and learn.

What a Child Needs to Know

Parents can begin by building on the groundwork that was laid from birth to five. By six or seven, children should have and use acceptable vocabulary for communicating about the body parts of both sexes. It is now important for children to not only know about their bodies but also about the bodies of the opposite sex. It is important that young children be able to have and use a clear vocabulary for sexual body parts. They will need that vocabulary so that they can begin to manage and protect their own bodies independently of their parents. Later on they will use and build on that vocabulary as they learn about the process of reproduction

As your child approaches puberty they should know the complete facts and biological process of human reproduction. This is key to an understanding of puberty as well as contraception, and sexual health. Anyone without a clear understanding of the biology of reproduction is at risk for believing the myths that were about when you and I were that age and are also out there today. Myths such as you can't get pregnant the first time you have intercourse or you can't get pregnant while you are having your period. Unwanted pregnancies are often the result of a lack of information or the lack of self-esteem or both. Knowing about the process of reproduction or sexual intercourse doesn't increase the risk that your child will become sexually active earlier. In fact, there have been studies that show that kids that know the facts about sex are less likely to become sexually active at an earlier age and are more likely to be more responsible when they do become sexually active.

Managing Needs

From 6-12 years of age, children need to begin to be aware of their own needs and they should begin to take an active role in helping to get those needs met. This includes beginning to take an active role in managing their body's health and safety. Parents can help children to identify some of their needs like sleep or hunger and involve them in the management of those needs. Children can begin to take an active role in preparing dinner, taking a bath, or brushing their own teeth. In that way, children will learn that they can manage their own affairs, that they do have an influence over their bodies, and that they can meet their needs themselves. Giving children this independence communicates to them that they have self worth, and that they can influence their future rather than feeling that they are powerless to make a difference. That information will be

priceless later on in adolescents when actively managing ones needs carries much more lasting consequences.

Valuing the Health Care System

During this time parents can help their child become familiar with the health care system and help them to view it as non-frightening. Talk to your child about their doctor's appointments and make sure that they are talking directly to their doctor about their health. This is often a time when pediatricians will talk to a child alone and not through their parents. This is an important skill because later on in adolescents and throughout their live you want your child to be able to seek out the medical attention that they may need.

What does it mean to be a friend?

Another important skill parents often over-look is helping their child to be aware of how to develop and maintain friendships. Remember, children at this point are discovering peer groups and developing friendships. Build on those experiences so that your child will learn now the proper roles and responsibilities about being a friend. Help your child discover what it means to be a friend and to have a relationship with another human being. Remember you often teach by example so ask yourself, are my relationships based on respect and mutuality or are they exploitive? This again can lay the groundwork for dating and marital relationships that develop later on in adolescents and adulthood.

Sexuality is a normal part of life

By the end of this period in your child's life, they should have an understanding that sexuality is a natural part of life and that sexual feelings are both legitimate and normal. Remember how you felt at 12 over certain feelings or activities such as masturbation and how much easier it would have been to realize that you were normal and ok.

This is a time of great change in your child. It is a time when your child is moving out into the world and becoming the person he or she will someday be. They need to be armed with information and a positive sense of self if they are to manage later on when the stakes are much higher.

Help is available. You can call Planned Parenthood's Help line at 1-866-600-6886 or go to our website at www.pprsr.org and go to the "ask an educator" section. At both places you can request a free copy of our booklet "Sex Education at Home." There are also other links and help for parents on the website.

III-Talking to Your Child about Sex and Sexuality

In the last issue of the *Genesee Valley Parent* magazine, we explored children's sexual development ages 6 until about 12. This time was characterized by an increasing sense of independence and a need for self-reliance. Parents were encouraged to guide their children through these changes by helping them to safely develop their independence and to help them gain a feeling of self-confidence. We talked about tools we could use to accomplish this such as "Teachable Moments". We talked about helping children begin to manage some of their own needs at this early age so they will develop a sense of empowerment that will be vital as they move into puberty and adulthood. We also talked about helping our children to develop positive friendships with others which will assist them later as they pick girl friends and boy friends and still later a partner. The groundwork we have laid as parents up to this point is about to be put to the test.

Puberty

From ages 8 – 12 children begin to go through the changes of puberty. It is important to note that all children go through these changes at their own pace. Some start early and some start late. Children may begin to express concern that they are on a different time table than their peers. Developing early or late can sometimes isolate children from their own peer groups. They may feel different – either ahead or behind their friends. Parents can do a lot to reassure their children that their own rate of growth is perfectly normal and that they are beginning the process of becoming an adult. Listen to your kid's concerns and feelings about growing up and acknowledge that it is sometimes a difficult time. Share with them your remembrances about that time in your life. If you or your children have serious concerns about their development it is always wise to talk to your child's doctor.

Girls and Puberty

Girls often develop about two years earlier than boys. Girls often grow taller than boys. They develop underarm hair and pubic hair. Girls will notice that their hips get wider and their buttocks fill out. They will also begin to notice that their breast begin to develop. Both boys and girls may feel embarrassed about some of these changes to their bodies. It is important for girls to have accurate information about these changes so that they can be reassured that what they are going through is normal. Girls at this age are vulnerable to developing an eating disorder. As their bodies change and the pressures of a society trying to force a stereotypic ideal of how girls and women should look, they may begin to view themselves as fat. Parents need to supportively reassure a young girl that her developing body is normal.

Menstruation

Menstruation is an important event in every girl's life. It can begin as early as age 8 or as late as age 16. Most girls begin to menstruate around the age of 12. Before a girl begins to menstruate she should have a good understanding about this change to her body and she should be given the tools and knowledge to manage that change. Girls who have information about their periods, including why this is happening to them and instructions on how to use pads or tampons have a much easier time with the onset of menstruation. They also feel self assured and confident that they can manage their bodies.

Menstruation is a normal and healthy change that can be a rite of passage as a girl begins to become a woman. Reassure your daughter that she can still participate in gym, swim, and do everything she normally does while menstruating.

Boys and Puberty

Puberty also brings major changes for boys. They will also begin to develop body hair. Their chests will flatten out as their shoulders get wider. Their voice become deeper and often cracks. They often experience an erection for no apparent reason which can cause embarrassment. Boy may also begin to experience "wet dreams" or an ejaculation of sperm during sleep. As with menstruation, if a boy has an understanding of this it helps to avoid any fear or worry.

For both girls and boys, the key for parents is to keep the lines of communication as open as possible. You should be seen as a resource for your adolescents on these changes. This is often difficult for both parents and their teens. During the adolescence year's it is extremely important that parents and children keep talking to each other about sexuality. At times it will seem that your child really isn't listening. But, studies have shown that one of the most important predictors of responsible sexual activity later on in life is the amount of open communication the child received about sexuality.

Adolescence and Masturbation

Masturbation is a normal activity for young people during adolescence. It is important to reassure children that it does not cause physical or psychological harm. Many teens have heard the old stories about masturbation causing blindness or hair growth on their palms. They need to be reassured that this is a normal activity and a natural release of sexual tension and an alternative to sexual activity.

Sexual Orientation

Heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality refers to an emotional, physical, romantic and sexual attraction toward members of the opposite sex, both sexes, or the same sex respectively. These are the terms used to describe a person's sexual orientation.

During adolescents young people continue to develop their sexual orientation and begin to fully identify with it. By late adolescence most teens have an idea of this orientation. Unfortunately, in our society many homosexuals and bisexuals face discrimination. A teen that is gay or lesbian or bisexual may spend a great deal of time and energy hiding his or her sexual orientation in order to be accepted by society, loved ones, or peers.

When parents first hear that their child may be homosexual or bisexual their responses vary greatly. They may be concerned for the welfare of their child. They may be upset, confused, angry or guilty. Young people who are grappling with the process of self-discovery about their sexuality need your guidance, support and understanding. A local resource for parents is Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

Adolescent Pregnancy and STI Prevention

Every year over a million teenagers become pregnant in the U.S. and the vast majority of those pregnancies are unintended. The U.S. has the highest sexually transmitted infections (STI) rates in the industrialized world. The most important thing you can give your adolescent to prevent these two problems is information and a strong value system. Share your values with them, encourage them to remain abstinent and give them the information they need to engage in sex responsibly when they decide that it is appropriate.

Many teens that become pregnant don't even know how pregnancy occurs. If they don't know the facts and those facts are not grounded in the biological facts of pregnancy, they are vulnerable. They believe the hundreds of myths that are out among teens such as that they can't become pregnant the first time or they can't get pregnant during their period. Without the facts of sexuality, any adolescent is vulnerable.

Many teens also don't believe that an STI can happen to them. They believe that their partner looks ok or that they "seem healthy". Many of them don't realize how STIs are spread, how or where to get tested or what they can do for prevention.

Ignorance is *never* the answer to the problem of teenage pregnancy. Talk to your child about birth control, pregnancy prevention and the reality of STIs. Arm them with information that they can take out into the world and protect themselves.

Keys to Effective Communication with your Teen

- **Gear information to the teen's level** – It doesn't matter the age – almost any information can be relayed more effectively if the child's developmental level is taken into consideration
- **Less is better than more** – Start small, before you launch into a two hour lecture. Try a short factual answer and follow up with a question like “Did that answer your question?” If your teen seems to want more you have an opportunity to expand on your answer. Open effective communication is often a dialogue and rarely a lecture.
- **Approach sexuality issues proactively rather than reactively** - Don't always wait for them to ask the questions. You can always explore what they are thinking or feeling about a subject. Use teachable moments.
- **Be positive and honest, it is ok to say “I don't know”** – You can't be the expert on all things so it is OK if you don't know the answer. You and your child can do the research together.
- **Keep the doors of communication open** – Your facial expression, body language, or condemning words can shut down communication. Verbal and non-verbal cues give a lot of information. Try to be calm, interested, and welcoming. That will tell the child that you are a resource to them and not a wall that they must get around to get an answer.

Parents Need Help Too

Over the past three issues we have looked at ways of talking to your child about sex and sexuality. Hopefully, they have been helpful. There isn't anyone that is completely confident talking with their own children about sex and sexuality. It is important to realize that we all need help with this one and to actively search out that help.

For more information about talking to your child or teen about sex, email Rick Bartell at rbartell@pprsr.org, or contact him at (585) 546-2771, ext. 346. The Planned Parenthood of the Rochester/Syracuse Region website at www.pprsr.org is a great resource for information as well.