

How to Talk to Your Kids About Sex

The birds-and-the-bees chat can be tough. But avoiding it can have consequences. Here's how to get ready.

February 16, 2006 By Denene Millner

My daughter Mari, 6, just asked me where babies come from. Again. "If the egg is in your stomach, how did Daddy put his seed in there?" Sometimes I think the kid is too inquisitive for her own good. And mine. I Because I'm just not ready to talk to her about s-e-x. And as a parent, I'm not alone. "I try to push it away, even though I'm getting signs that it's time," laments Renee White, a Snellville, Georgia, mom of three, ages 4 to 9. "Just how do I have that type of conversation with my babies? It's like, 'Ew—I can not go there!'" Even if we parents can't handle talking to our kids, the fact that our children are asking means they're ready. According to Adolph Brown III, a child psychologist and founder of the Child and Family Wellness Centers in Virginia Beach, Virginia, it's OK to talk to kids about sex as early as potty-training age. Even if they're not asking, we should be talking, says Gail E. Wyatt, a UCLA professor and sex therapist. "This is an ongoing dialogue, not a one-time discussion. You don't wait until the child is a teenager or something traumatic has happened," she says. "They need to know about their bodies, so that when changes occur, they're not afraid and they understand. You create an atmosphere in your home in which you can talk about anything."

When we avoid talking about sex, we teach our kids that we don't think it's important. And, Wyatt adds, there's a risk that kids will seek the information from peers—which comes with the risk that they'll get inaccurate information and risk pregnancy or exposure to a sexually transmitted disease.

According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, children whose parents talk to them about contraception are more likely to use it when they become sexually active. Teens are three times more likely to use condoms if their parents talk to them about condoms *before* they start having sex, says Advocates for Youth, a Washington, DC-based sexual health policy organization. And while one study found that 55% of black teens talk to their parents about HIV, another study found that black and Latino parental communication about sex can be moralistic, leading teens to keep sexual activity a secret.

Moreover, according to a recent study published in *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, among parents of color, mistrust of the medical community and conspiracy theories about HIV may contribute to inaccurate information about condoms and the pill.

Patricia Terrell, 56, the mother of two adult children, says her own parents' discussion of sex wasn't so much about facts. "It was more about not having sex and how 'bastard babies' were going to ruin your life. Good girls waited; loose girls didn't. Sex meant fear and guilt."

Step 1: Check your information

The first step to schooling your kids on the basics of sex is to make sure that you're working with accurate information. (See resources at the end of this article.) Surf the Web, buy a book or ask your child's pediatrician or a health professional what to say.

Also, clarify your beliefs for yourself before communicating them to your children. When and under which conditions is it OK to have sex? Is it OK for your child to use contraceptives? Is it OK for her (or him) to have a baby without being married?

"Think about what you want to teach and how you can communicate that in a way your child can understand," says Monica Rodriguez, a vice president at the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. Then practice talking it through with your partner or a friend until you feel comfortable.

Step 2: Talk early and often

When Rodriguez explained to her 3-year-old niece where babies come from, she said, "A part of the mommy and daddy come together to make the baby; the baby grows in the uterus; and when it's ready, it comes out." Why all the details? Because it's important for children to be knowledgeable about all parts of their bodies—including their vaginas and penises—so they can communicate about them.

Use real-life events called "teachable moments"—a neighbor's pregnancy, a music video, a teen-magazine story—to initiate mini-conversations about everything from unplanned pregnancy to condoms to HIV. The questions your child asks and the life events she's exposed to will help you know what's appropriate.

But don't cloak such discussions in threats or warnings, says Wyatt, lest you send the message that your child can't come to you if, for instance, she gets pregnant or sexually abused.

Step 3: Communicate your values

So what if your teen thinks you're corny? Explain your beliefs, and tell your children what you expect in the way of sexual behavior. "A lot of times, parents think they aren't interested, but teenagers do want to know their parents' perspective," Rodriguez says. "Maybe they'll listen, maybe not, but at least you communicated."

Step 4: Be direct, and answer questions

When Nedra Redding, 68, of South Bend, Indiana, discusses sex with her 14-year-old granddaughter, Danielle, she talks about intercourse—vaginal, oral and anal—STDs and what cherry, dick and pussy mean. Redding's reason for such candor? "I want her to hear it from me before she hears it on the street," she says. Often Danielle sits wide-eyed, but she does ask

questions. Her grandmother answers what she can and dials back on what she can't.

Mark Schuster, coauthor of *Everything You Never Wanted Your Kids to Know About Sex (And You Were Afraid They'd Ask)* (Crown), thinks Redding has the right idea. He adds, "If you shut down your child's questions, you'll shut down the dialogue, and she'll get not-so-correct answers elsewhere. So answer away. By the time she reaches puberty, she'll take it for granted—'Of course I can ask my parents this question about sex.'"

Scared you're no expert? "It's OK to say, 'I don't know, but give me a chance to find out'—or better, 'Let's find out together,'" says Rodriguez.

Taking the Plunge

By the time I finished writing this, I was inspired to tell my daughter how babies are made. It was easier than I thought. She wanted to know why one would put a penis into a vagina. I told her that it was a natural way for men and women to express their love. She was cool—she didn't have any follow-up questions, just trotted off to watch *Sponge Bob*. I only hope that telling her about her period, boys, hormones and cherries will be as easy. But even if it's not, I'll still do it.

Check out these resources for help in teaching your kids about sex.

- **Planned Parenthood.** Info about sex, contraceptives, STDs and sexual health.
www.plannedparenthood.org
- ***It's So Amazing*** (Candlewick, \$21.99), by Robie Harris and Michael Emberley. This book explains basic anatomy, conception, fetal development, birth, genetics, adoption, love, sexual abuse and HIV in a way a 7-year-old can understand.
- **Sex Ed Mom.** Advice, teaching tips and monthly live chats for parents. www.sexedmom.com
- **"Families Are Talking."** Newsletters that help adults talk to children about sexuality.
www.siecus.org/pubs/pubs0004.html

Sex Smarts at Every Age

Every child's needs are unique, so heed the signs yours provides. Here are some guidelines about what children need to know and when.

Ages 2-3: Name body parts. Explain to boys that they have penises and to girls that they have vaginas and that both are used mostly for urinating.

Age 4: Talk to them about touching and boundaries. Explain to your kids that it's OK to touch your genitals, but not in front of other people. Plus, teach your kids to protect themselves. "Children need to know that their privates are off limits to people," says Virginia Beach, Virginia-based child psychologist Adolph Brown III. "Tell them that no matter who touches them, if it is inappropriate,

they should tell someone.”

Age 6: Explain how babies are made. Say, “Sperm comes out of the daddy’s penis when he puts it into the mommy’s vagina; and when the sperm goes onto the egg, the two grow into a baby.”

Ages 8-9: Discuss puberty, including wet dreams and menstruation. When these happen, they won’t come as a surprise.

Ages 11-12: Explain the power of hormones and the romantic and sexual feelings that accompany them. Discuss what it means to have a boyfriend or girlfriend and your expectations about acceptable and unacceptable touching, dating and telephone use.

Ages 13+: Your child will be curious about sex and experience peer pressure to have it. Talk about birth control and condoms; how STDs and HIV are transmitted; oral, vaginal and anal sex; hetero- vs. homosexuality; and relationship ups and downs.