

Children & learning about sexuality

Learning about sexuality is just as important to children as any other learning. Children need to learn about the sexual parts of their body, just as they learn about arms and legs. They need to feel good about their body and about being themselves.

Children build their understanding of sexual matters, relationships and values a little at a time as they grow and mature. They learn from lots of sources whether parents teach them about it or not.

When parents talk with children easily and openly, it is a chance to give correct information and to discuss family values. Children learn that it is OK to talk with parents about these things.

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Influences on children's learning

Learning about sexuality means learning about bodies, babies, puberty, gender, relationships, feelings, making decisions and family values.

Children build their understanding of these things bit by bit as they grow up, and learn from many different sources.

Parents

Children learn from parents — their first teachers. What you think and feel about sexuality has a big influence on how you deal with your child's sexual development.

What your own parents said and did, your religion, cultural background and feelings all affect how you approach it.

You can help your children to feel good, healthy and normal by what you say and do.

How adults treat each other

Children also learn from how they see their parents treating each other, and whether they care for and respect each other.

Some children see adults 'putting down' or making fun of people of the other sex, or even themselves. This can teach children to feel unhappy about who they are. They can learn to feel afraid of, or think less of a particular gender.



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Influences on children's learning *continued*

Media

From a young age children are influenced by media such as TV, movies, electronic games, social media, websites, magazines and billboards.

The intensity and frequency of this media is far greater than it has ever been.

Children see lots of sexualised images and examples of what it means to be a girl, boy, man or woman and how they should act.

Sometimes children see examples of unhealthy attitudes and behaviours. They may see sexual violence and other sexual activity that they don't understand and this can worry them.

Children's services and schools

Most schools and early childhood services teach children about their bodies, including the correct names for parts of their bodies.

They teach children how to ask for help if they don't feel safe.

Children benefit when parents talk with them easily and openly about sexuality in ways that suit their age and development.



Why talk with children about sexuality?

It is important to talk with children about sexuality because:

- it is a chance to give accurate, balanced information.
- these conversations can strengthen your relationship. It builds trust and children learn that they can talk with you about anything, including sensitive things. It will be easier to talk about these things as your children become teenagers
- open communication at home can help keep children safe from abuse. If children get the message that sex and bodies are 'secret' they may not tell you if something worries them. Open discussion helps children to know what is OK and not OK, and that they can talk with you about it
- it helps children cope with the changes that come with puberty if they know what to expect and that they can talk with you about it

- research shows that children who receive good sexuality education are more likely to make healthier choices when it comes to sexual behaviours and relationships. They:
 - delay having sex
 - have less unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.

Talking about sexuality can also make life easier for children who don't fit usual boy/girl 'types'. Challenging stereotypes about what girls and boys are 'supposed' to do can give children a broader view of what it means to be a boy or a girl, and improve their wellbeing and sense of belonging.

While many parents accept the value of talking with their children about these matters, it can sometimes be hard to know what to say or how to go about it. The following tips may be useful.

Tips for talking with children

Start talking in age-appropriate ways when your children are young. Try to be relaxed and easy so that it becomes just like any other topic you help them learn about. If you find it hard to talk about these things you could say 'When I was young no one spoke to me about sexuality. It is really important and I want us to be able to talk about it'. Your children will know it is OK to discuss this topic.

In the early years

- Take opportunities as they arise to have small conversations. Let the situation and the child's questions and level of interest guide what you share.
- Give small amounts of information that suit your child's age and development. An honest, simple explanation is often all that young children need.
- Don't bombard them with information — they will only take in what they can absorb.

It's best to have lots of small conversations over time. Don't wait to have the 'one big talk'.

- It can help to find out what your child knows about a topic before giving information, e.g. if they ask where babies come from you could ask 'Where do you think they come from?' You could also try to find out why they are asking the question. This can help you give information in a way that suits their understanding.
- Be willing to talk about topics more than once. Children often want to hear the same thing a number of times until they fully understand.

Be a 'tell-able' parent. Be approachable and unshockable. Let your children know that this is a topic you are happy to talk about.

- Start talking about bodies when your child is young. Use the correct names for body parts; penis, testicles, vagina, vulva, breasts — just as you would for arms and legs. This normalises the words and makes these body parts just like any other, without shame or embarrassment. Research shows that knowing the right names enhances children's body image and confidence. They have the words they need to communicate about these parts of their body.
- From a young age, children are curious about where they came from. They may ask you a lot of questions about babies. You could say to preschool children that 'Babies start as a tiny egg and grow in a special place called the uterus, inside their mother'. This is usually all they want to know for a while. Four and five year olds can understand that you need a sperm (like a seed) from a man, and an ovum (like a tiny egg) from a woman to make a baby. You could tell older children that the sperm comes from Dad's penis and the egg from Mum's ovaries. Sometimes, because Mum and Dad love each other very much, they kiss and cuddle and their bodies get very close. Dad puts his penis inside Mum's vagina. Not all sperm finds an egg to make into a baby, only special ones like the one that made you.
- If children are born using donated tissue, or are adopted, it is important that their story is talked about in a normal and natural way. There are lots of ways families can be formed — all children have a right to know their history.

- Sometimes books written for children can be very useful in giving you words and pictures that suit your child's age. Read them with your children too. You could find out if your school or local health centre run sessions for parents on sexual health.

Finding out what your school is teaching about sexual health can be a good way to start conversations at home.

In the primary school years

- Puberty can start as early as 8, often by 10 or 11. It is important that children have information about the physical and emotional changes before they happen, e.g. periods, erections, wet dreams. You could tell funny stories from your own puberty if you have any.
- Children develop at different rates and can feel self conscious if they seem different from their peers. Let them know there is a wide range of 'normal' and help them to feel confident and happy about being themselves.
- At age 9 or 10 some children may start to become attracted to others. Talk about friendships and getting along with their peers — it will be their main concern.
- Some children and young people are attracted to others of the same sex, or both sexes. This can make them feel different, confused and alone. Talking about sex and feelings in an inclusive way will help children know they can talk with you however they are feeling.



Tips for talking with children *continued*

- Encourage children to view media critically and question what they see and hear, e.g. are the versions of beauty or love they see on TV real? How do the boys/girls/men/women look and act? Is it real? What message does it give?
- Talk with your children about relationships, and feelings. Focus on respect and care. Talk about making good decisions that keep them and others safe.

Online

- Be aware that sexual matters may come up online for your children on mobile phones or computers. They may come across things that can harm, scare or worry them. There may be bullying, 'sexting' (sending sexual material or images

by mobile phone) or pornography. The best protection is when children know they can come to you and tell you what's happening. You can solve problems together and work out ways to keep them safe.

Good communication needs two-way talk. Listen to your child and try not to lecture. Open conversations about feelings and relationships help them work out their values.

What if they don't ask?

If your children don't ask you questions, it does not mean they are not interested. They may be getting the message that this is a topic you are not keen to talk about. You will need to be the one that brings it up.

If they don't want to talk, or say they know it all already, you could ask to chat for a short while anyway.



Children with a disability

Children with a disability need to learn about sexuality and relationships too. As with all children they need accurate information that suits their age and development. There are opportunities to talk about these things simply and easily in everyday situations. Help them learn about the changes of puberty before they happen, and give them correct terminology. Concepts may need to be repeated a number of times or reinforced in different ways. Learning about these things builds children's confidence and a positive attitude to their sexuality. It makes them less vulnerable to exploitation or abuse.

Children with a disability need to learn about privacy, safety and basic sexual matters. Seek help from professionals if you need it. Your doctor or school counsellor may be a good place to start.

Talking with sons and daughters

Boys and girls benefit when both men and women are involved in this part of their learning.

In the past it has often been seen as 'mum's job' to handle these things. As more men become involved in the day to day care of their children, it is likely that they will be more involved in these conversations too.

It is important that dads are seen as reliable sources of information and that children, especially boys, get the message it is OK for men to talk about these things.

No one should have to talk about things that make them very uncomfortable. If a father sees his daughter doesn't want to discuss bras and periods with him, it's best not to persist.

Some mums and dads may also feel they don't have enough understanding about what is happening for their child of the opposite gender. You could:

- talk about aspects you feel comfortable with, and find books for the parts that you don't
- identify a trusted person of the same gender as your son or daughter they could talk with.

It can help to let your child know you feel uncomfortable, or don't know much about the topic. Say something like 'I'm not sure what to say, but I think it's really important we can talk about it. When I was a boy/girl, the only thing I knew about girls/boys was...'

Caring touch

Caring touch such as hugs and cuddles by both parents is very important for children to feel loved and learn to show love and affection. If they experience caring touch they are more likely to identify any touch that is inappropriate.

Some fathers and stepfathers worry about cuddling or holding their child because they fear being accused of sexual abuse. There is a difference between caring and sexual touch. It is the adult's responsibility not to cross the line.

Give children lots of hugs, cuddles and caring touch. Most of all, children need to feel loved and loveable.



Children's behaviours

As children grow up, there are behaviours related to the sexual parts of the body that are common at different ages. These can sometimes surprise, embarrass or worry parents.

Children's behaviours are usually not 'sexual' in the way that adults understand them. They are mostly a natural part of how children learn about sexuality and are nothing to worry about.

It can help parents to know what is usual for their child's age, and how to talk with children about it.

In the preschool years

- **Babies learn about the world through touch.** Just as they play with their fingers and toes, babies can play with their genitals when their nappy is off. This is part of their natural curiosity.
- **Preschool children are often not modest about their bodies and enjoying being naked.**
- **They are curious and interested in looking at their own and other's naked bodies.** As genitals are usually covered, they are especially interesting! They will notice that boys' and girls' bodies are different and may ask 'Why' or 'What's that?'.
- **They are often interested in parents' or familiar adults' bodies.** They might ask about them or want to touch them, e.g. in the shower or bath.
- **By three years of age, children can say whether they are a boy or a girl.** By six or seven they understand that this does not usually change. A small number of children will identify as the opposite gender to their biological sex.

- Four year olds are very interested in what people do in bathrooms and toilets. They often joke about toilets and like to use swear words or 'toilet words' if they know any.
- In the early years it is common for children to touch their genitals. They may do it because it feels good, or is comforting if they are worried. They may be finding out about their body, or simply need to go to the toilet.

In the primary school years

- By early primary school, children are more curious about adult sexuality and may ask about gender differences, babies, pregnancy and birth.
- They enjoy using swear words, 'toilet' words or names for private body parts when telling stories or asking questions.
- They may have heard about sexual intercourse and like to talk about it, often using words they have heard from their friends.
- Children move from having friends of both sexes, towards focussing more on same-sex friendships.
- By mid-primary school years, children usually have a greater sense of privacy. They may be embarrassed about nudity and modest in front of parents or others.
- They can begin talking about sex and tease and joke with peers. They may play games about kissing or pretend marriage.
- Children in these years may play games involving parts of the body or looking under toilet doors. This kind of play comes from increased curiosity about bodies. Children usually enjoy these games just as they do other games. If they are found playing them they can be embarrassed, especially if they see parents do not approve or are embarrassed or shocked. If asked to stop and play something else they usually do.

- If you are not sure how to react, stay calm, take a deep breath and think about the message you want to give. What you say will depend on your child's age and maturity. If children are quite young, you could ignore it. For four and five year olds you could say 'It is OK to be curious, but people's bodies are private. It is not OK to touch other people's bodies, or for other people to touch yours'. Tell them 'It looks like you are interested in finding out about bodies. I will find a picture book for you that explains it'. This type of play is usually nothing to worry about if:

- it is between friends of the same age, size and power
- no one is being pushed to do something they don't want to do
- they are not doing something that children of that age don't usually know about
- it does not take over all their play time, and they are easily re-directed.

Make sure all children know they can say 'No' or 'Stop' to any touching they do not like or want, and that unwanted touching should never be kept a secret. Help them understand that their whole body is private.

When to be concerned

There are some things children do which might be cause for concern such as:

- knowing more about sex than you would expect for a child's age
- forcing others to play sex games, or playing them with much younger children
- talking and playing about sex much more than other children
- masturbating so much that it affects their play, or in public after kindergarten age
- always drawing the sexual parts of bodies, or being afraid or upset when people talk about their bodies or sex
- being very anxious about being with a particular person when there seems to be no reason.

It could also be a cause for concern if children have unexplained redness, soreness or injury of the genital areas or mouth. Signs of stress, such as a return to bedwetting, soiling their pants or hurting themselves show that your child needs help.

If you are concerned, talk it over with your doctor or counsellor.

Children's behaviours related to sexuality are usually a natural part of how they learn, and nothing to worry about. However, if you are concerned about your child, seek help from your doctor or counsellor.

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