

How to Talk with Your Children about Sex

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“When should I talk to my children about sex?” It’s a good question but in truth parents begin talking about sex with their children as soon as they’re born. They talk about it verbally and non-verbally. The parents’ beliefs, fears, pleasures and values related to sex are conveyed in how they feed, soothe, clean and bathe the infant; how they dress the child; how they express their affection toward the child; how the parents demonstrate their affection for one another in front of the child; how the parents problem solve; how males and females are socialized into their roles in the family; etc. In other words, interpersonal relations within the family become a model, to a certain extent, for later sexual relations.

If in a given family the topic of sex is shrouded in mystery, the children may develop anxiety and feelings of bodily shame that may be carried forward and predominate in their later adult sexual relations. In a family where sex is seen as disgusting, puberty may leave children feeling guilty, not for something they did but for something they are – sexual beings.

When I talk with young teens about sex, they are often very quiet. Some are nervous, some are excited – they all listen attentively even if they appear to not be listening at all. They sit quietly as I talk about how sex is a kind of communication, that I think it is best to have sex within the context of a loving relationship and that they need to manage their anxieties and excitement enough to make responsible decisions for themselves. They smile nervously, shuffle their feet, tear little pieces of paper, look at their shoes, look at me and basically say – nothing. I talk briefly about anatomy and physiology and sexual response and about sexually transmitted diseases. I tell them about verbal and nonverbal communication and the different messages that can be conveyed non-verbally through sexual involvement. To emphasize the notion that sex should take place in the context of a loving relationship, I broaden the definition of sex (without encouraging them in one direction or another) to include everything from flirting to sexual intercourse. I talk about intimacy, the rights and responsibilities of being sexually involved with someone and about how the changes in their bodies change their relationships with others. I talk with them about communicating about sex with someone they love and also about communicating with friends about their romantic interests and questions. They look down. They fidget. They listen. Then I raise the topic of talking with parents about sex and suddenly most of them have an awful lot to say.

“I would never talk about sex with my parents.”

“I can talk with my Mom but I would never talk with my Dad. He’s a guy!”

“I can talk with my Dad but I would never talk with my Mom!”

“My Mom talks to me and I pretend that I’m not listening but I really am listening.”

“I asked my Mom a question and she started talking about how the glasses were dirty.”

“When I asked my Mom, she got nervous, said she was nervous and then said we’d talk about it anyway and it was good. She’s very open about those things.”

“My Dad just says “Can’t we talk about something else?””

“My Dad just got up and went out into the garage.”

“My Dad says, “Go ask your mother.”

“I hate talking with my parents about sex because they always misunderstand me. They don’t listen at all. If I ask a question about sex, they think I did it. But I didn’t.”

“Yeah, and they always get the last word. They always have to be right. But they’re wrong. Why can’t they just listen and answer the question.”

“Yeah, they always over-react and think you did it just because you asked a question.”

“I asked my parents a question and they just said “I don’t want you doing that till you get married,” so I had to ask my friend.”

“I talk to my big sister. She tells me everything.”

Talking Explicitly with Young Children about Sex

When talking explicitly with prepubescent children about sex it is important to have a matter-of-fact attitude. Help them learn about the territory, the geography or anatomy of their bodies and that of the opposite sex. Teach them about privacy and affection. Be direct in your answers but don’t flood them with more information than they are asking to hear. Give them the kind of answers that will encourage them to ask more questions. Tell them directly about socially appropriate behavior with regard to affection, touching, bathing, toileting, dressing, etc. as it relates to their age. Talk about anatomy but don’t turn it into an abstract science lesson. Give them the sense that you are not just talking about body parts but about whole people in relationships to one another. Tell them about the risks and responsibilities of sexual involvement in a way that helps them to make good decisions but doesn’t fill them with fear. And remember that you are teaching them about sexual relations everyday through your interpersonal relations with them and all the other members of your family.

Talking With Teenagers About Sex

Adolescents have more developed sexual organs, sexual interest and cognitive abilities than younger children. They need the basic information about anatomy, physiology and the rest. It is often useful to provide this information in both written form as well as in a conversation between parent and adolescent and/or in a classroom setting. It is best to be open, honest and direct. Beyond the essential and basic information about sex are all the other components of mature sexuality in which sexuality becomes a forum for relatedness, an expression of intimacy, a mode of communication and the means of procreation.

When children start becoming young men and young women and talk with their parents about sex, it is not uncommon for everyone to get a little nervous (or even a lot nervous!). Even if they have talked about sex before, the subject seems new and it is charged with new feelings. The parents may not feel very comfortable talking about sex, and young teens may feel uncomfortable talking about it too while their bodies are in such rapid transformation. But even if they each feel reasonably comfortable with the subject matter, another component to make this conversation difficult is that after years of being a young child relating to an adult parent, suddenly the child is transforming into an adult and the parent-child relation is transforming as well.

What once was a relationship between a boy and his Mom and Dad, is now becoming a relationship between a young man and his father, who can show him the ways of being a man, and between a young man and his Mother, who is also a woman. What once was a relationship between a girl and her Mom and Dad is now becoming a relationship between a young woman and her Mother, who can show her the ways of being a woman, and between a young woman and her Father, who is also a man.

Acknowledging these changing relationships is often a good way to start a conversation between parents and their young adolescent child on the subject of sex. Sometimes a book with illustrations is a good way to structure the discussion. Adolescents should be encouraged to ask what they want to know and parents should try to provide the information asked for along with an open invitation to talk more if they want. If adolescents ask for personal confessions about the parents' sexual practices it is best to speak with them frankly about their (the adolescent's) concerns and provide them with information to help them make their choices while at the same time offering no personal confessions or demonstrations. Personal confessions and demonstrations by parents are usually confusing and over-stimulating to adolescents. Adolescents don't need to know the details about the private sexual relations of their parents or of their parents' previous relationships. Adolescents need parents to listen to them, talk with them, and help them to make good decisions in their own relationships. For example, if a parent says, "I had premarital sex but I don't want you to do that." The child might say, "You did it, so why can't I?" And if the parent says, "I didn't have premarital sex and I don't want you to do it either." The adolescent might say, "Well, you didn't do it, so you know nothing about it." But if the parent leaves him/herself out as a model, the parent can be more available to help the youngster make his or her own decisions.

When talking with adolescents about sex, it is important not to shame them, humiliate them, or tease them about their interest. Some families will prefer to talk privately in a quiet part of the house and others will find it easier to talk while taking a walk together. It is often very helpful to acknowledge the nervousness in the room, if it is there, and to speak openly about not knowing how to begin, about wanting to talk about something that is difficult to talk about, and about talking about something you've never discussed before. Take your time in talking about sex and be sure to listen to your child's concerns. Parents, on the one hand, often want to say nothing and, on the other hand, feel compelled to say more than their adolescents are really interested in hearing. So *listening* closely to your adolescent is every bit as important as *talking* with them about this very important topic. Finally, it is important to remember that if you don't talk with them about sex, someone else will and the information may or may not be as good as the information and values you have to offer. Sex is communication and the first step in learning about sex is learning how to communicate about sex.

While parents will convey their own values to their children in what they say and the way they say it, the main value, embedded in this chapter, is simply that sexuality is a component of a human relationship involving two people who are making responsible decisions about the way they show their affection toward one another. As a psychologist, I do not encourage adolescents to have sex. I do encourage adolescents to have responsible relationships characterized by mutuality, caring, and respect. For most

adolescents, in their early teens, sexuality is expressed in hand holding, talking, hugging and sometimes kissing and ‘exploratory’ touching. Whether teens are less sexually involved than this or more sexually involved than this, there is no doubt about it, their bodies are definitely changing. And as their bodies change, their relationships to others change, as well. As they go through these changes it is important for them to receive good information and be able to talk with responsible adults about that information without feeling a pressure to become sexually active. Instead the focus should be on becoming interpersonally active. Then, if at some point in the future they should become sexually active, they will already have some of the skills necessary for communicating, behaving responsibly, establishing intimacy, and enjoying being together.

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