

Sex Education: What Children Should Learn and When

When talking to your kids about sex, make sure the conversation is age-appropriate.

- Explain things in a way that your child can understand, given their age.
- Don't think you have to cover everything at once. Younger kids are interested in pregnancy and babies, rather than the act of sex.

Every child is different, but here is a rough guide to what children should be able to understand about sex and reproduction at different ages.



Infancy: Up to two years

- Toddlers should be able to name all the body parts including the genitals.
- Most two-year-olds know the difference between male and female, and can usually figure out if a person is male or female.

Early childhood: Two to five years old

- Children should understand the very basics of reproduction: a man and a woman make a baby together, and the baby grows in the woman's uterus.
- Children should understand their body is their own. Teach them about privacy around body issues. They should know other people can touch them in some ways but not other ways.

Middle childhood: Five to eight years old

- Children should have a basic understanding that some people are heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. They should also know what the role of sexuality is in relationships.
- Children should know about the basic social conventions of privacy, nudity, and respect for others in relationships.
- Children should be taught the basics about puberty towards the end of this age span, as a number of children will experience some pubertal development before age 10.
- Children's understanding of human reproduction should continue. This may include the role of sexual intercourse.

Tween years: Nine to 12 years old

- In addition to reinforcing all the things above they have already learned, tweens should be taught about safer sex and contraception.
- Tweens should understand what makes a positive relationship and what makes for a bad one.
- Tweens should also learn to judge whether depictions of sex and sexuality in the media are true or false, realistic or not, and whether they are positive or negative.

Teenagers: 13 to 18 years old

- Teens are generally very private people. However, if parents have spoken to their child early about sex increases the chance that teens will approach parents when difficult or dangerous things come up.

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Sex Education for Children: 8 Tips for Parents

Beginning a conversation about sex early and continuing that conversation as the child grows is the best sex education strategy. It lets parents avoid giving one big talk when the child reaches adolescence, when it may already be too late. These conversations are easiest when they come out of a life experience, like seeing a pregnant woman or a baby. Here are some tips:

1. Think about how you were taught about sex as a child

Ask yourself if you want your child to have the same or a different experience.

2. Give age-appropriate answers

This means explaining things in a way that your child can understand given their age. There is no need to answer questions they haven't asked. Don't overload them with information. They will glaze over and nothing will get through. See our guide to age-appropriate sex education.

3. Try to keep the exchange as a dialogue

When kids ask questions about sex, gently throw questions back at them. Find out what they know already and where they heard it from. This way, you can correct any misinformation from the start. Dialogue slows conversation down, giving you time to think, and lets you have a better idea when to stop.

It is very important to find out exactly what children are actually asking about. Sometimes when they ask where babies come from, they really want to know what 'adopted' means.

4. Be honest

Children can often figure out when parents are not telling them the truth. If this happens, children are less likely to be receptive in the future.

Do not worry if you do not know the answer yourself. Tell your child that the question was a good one, that you do not know the whole answer, and that you can both look up the answer together. Again, this helps slow the conversation down.

5. Read

There are great, age-appropriate books about sex and reproduction for both parents and kids. Reading also helps get over any embarrassment.

6. If your child hasn't asked about sex, start the conversation

Some kids are just naturally shy and don't tend to ask a lot of questions about anything. Do not wait. Initiate a conversation with the child about sex. Ask them what they know and what is being taught at school. Use examples from nature. Even in the city, animals are courting and mating all around us. Addressing animal reproduction first is a great way to introduce and reinforce sex education about people.

7. Keep your cool

Get ready for the fact that sex talk will come up at badly timed moments, like in a bank line-up, and at full volume. Do not feel you have to answer, but rather say "great question, let's talk about that in the car." Moments like these are also a great opportunity to explain about privacy issues. As the child learns about sex, you can let them know that speaking about it everywhere is not appropriate.

The car can be a great place to speak with your child about sex. The fact that you are both staring straight ahead may take some of the embarrassment out of the conversation. Sitting side by side on a park bench will do the same thing.

If your child asks you personal questions, answer in the abstract. Tell them you understand their curiosity but some things are a private part of your life. For example, if they ask if mummy and daddy have sex every night they go to bed together, you can answer that when people sleep together that does not necessarily mean that they are having sex.

8. Remember that sex education is a continuing process

Children will need some things repeated in order to understand. Keep talking.