

# BE AN ASKABLE PARENT

Asha / American Sexual Health Association

Sexual health is not just about sex--it includes the roles, behaviors and values people associate with being a man or a woman. Educating a child about sexual health is an important part of his or her healthy development. Their early understanding of sex, love, intimacy and their own sexuality can help mold their values, behavior, and even their self-image, for a lifetime.



Does your child feel it's okay to talk with you about sex and sexual health? If not, have you thought about who will answer your child's questions? Only you can tell your child that it's okay to ask you questions. You want to become **askable**! After all, you are your child's first and most important teacher. Loving and caring parents actively discover a child's needs for information and then find ways to fill those needs. Even adolescents in their mid-teens are still learning from you.

Here are some traits of an **askable parent**:

Shows respect, value and love for children.

Realizes that every difficult situation is not a crisis.

Wants communication, but doesn't expect to have all the answers.

Knows the most important part of communication is listening.

Doesn't laugh when a child asks a question, even in reaction to the child's cuteness.

Doesn't expect to be perfect, and knows that admitting mistakes is a valuable lesson for the child.

Is sometimes embarrassed by questions about sex but acknowledges the discomfort and explains it to the child.

Children are more likely to talk to an approachable parent. If you think the traits above describe you, then you are very askable.

## Continue to Learn

While talking to your child about sex and sexual health is important, it isn't necessarily easy for every parent. You may feel uncomfortable with the subject. But if you do, say so--your child will appreciate your honesty and your admission may even serve as an ice-breaker. Remember, talking about sex should be an ongoing conversation between you and your child, not an endurance contest for both of you trying to get through "the talk."

## What if I don't know all the answers?

Then you're like everyone else! It might be helpful to prepare by doing a little homework before you talk to your child. Reach out to others for information, understanding, and ideas on how to maintain open communication with your child. Support from other parents, family members, teachers, members of the clergy, and healthcare providers can help you and your child learn to talk about sexual health, a lifelong subject. See the resources section below for more.

## Be prepared

Parents who are uncomfortable talking about sexual health may find it helpful to plan what they will say and how they might answer their child's questions. When your child asks a question or does something that triggers a teachable moment, first make sure you know what the child is asking. Ask your child, "Do you mean...?" or "do you want to know about...?" After you've decided what to say, keep it short, simple and age appropriate--you don't need to offer more information than your child wants or needs to know.

It's equally important to prepare your emotional responses. It may be difficult to think of your child as a sexual being or to present yourself as one. Still, you know your child best and that puts you in the best position to answer his or her questions, resolve any confusion and share your feelings. **Open communication** and accurate information from you can help your child understand the impact of sexual activity, the benefit of waiting to have sex and the reasons why practicing safer sex is vital when he or she decides to become sexually active.