

Talking with children about sexuality: nine tips

By Debra W Haffner

Here are some tips for talking with your children about sexuality in a healthy and positive way.

1. **Reward your child's questions.** It can sometimes be a little surprising when your child asks you a question about sexuality. But instead of asking, 'Why are you asking?' or brushing off the subject by saying, 'We'll talk about this when you're older', try saying, 'I'm so glad you asked me that'. Be happy that your child feels comfortable enough to talk to you about sexuality issues.
2. **Introduce the topic.** Don't wait for your child to start the conversation. Many parents put off talking to their children about sexuality, assuming that a child will ask when he wants to know something. But some children are reluctant to begin these talks, and others simply aren't the type who ask a lot of questions. Do you wait for your child to ask about your religious faith, personal safety and other important topics before discussing them? The answer, more than likely, is no – and sexuality should be no different. **It's a parent's responsibility to introduce the topic**, little by little. Your child might never ask, but he still needs to know.
3. **Be honest.** It's OK if you don't have an answer to your child's question. If you don't know the answer, say so and explain that you'll find out and get back to her. If your child is school-age or older, you can look it up together. If you find you've given your child misinformation, don't hesitate to go back and tell her you'd like to try to give her a better answer now you've had time to think over your discussion.
4. **Talk about your feelings.** It's OK to feel uncomfortable. Many parents feel awkward talking to their children about sexuality because their parents didn't talk to them about these issues. There's no reason why you can't – or shouldn't – explain this to your child. You can say, 'I'm not used to talking about sex because Grandma didn't talk to me about it, but I think it's important and want us to. It will get easier as we go along'.
5. **Look for teaching opportunities.** Teaching opportunities arise naturally and provide a good venue to talk about some aspects of sexuality or other important topics. They might be a scene in a TV show or movie, the actions of a character in a book you've both read, or your teenager getting ready for a school dance. Teaching opportunities like these give you the opportunity to provide little bits of information, and to share your own family values without having to sit your child down for an uncomfortable series of formal talks.
6. **Listen to your child.** Try hard to really hear your child's concerns. Find out what he already knows about the topic you're discussing. Although your fifth-grade son's crush might seem silly to you, it's very important to him. Your willingness to listen during the primary school years sets the stage for when your child is an adolescent and has to make decisions about dating and sexual relationships.
7. **Explain your family values.** Facts aren't enough. Yes, your child needs to be educated about reproduction and puberty, but she also needs to hear your family values. She can learn facts from school and books, but **only you can teach her your values**. Think through the messages you want to convey to your child about sexuality.
8. **Talk about both men and women.** Educate your sons as well as your daughters. In many homes, parents educate their daughters about puberty and menstruation, but assume that boys will pick up what they need from their friends. Your son needs sexuality education from his parents, too.

It's the job of both parents to teach children about sexuality. In many homes, it's mum's job to talk about sexuality. In other homes, the mother talks to the daughters, while the father talks to his sons. But **children need to hear the adult viewpoint of both genders**. It teaches your children that men and women can talk about sexuality together, an important skill in adulthood.

In single-parent homes or homes with gay or lesbian parents, it's a good idea to ask for help from close relatives or friends of the other gender when talking about sexuality. This will help your child learn how to talk about the subject with both women and men.

9. **Be positive.** Talk about the joys of sexuality. It is so easy, when talking about sexuality with children, to focus on the negative consequences of unprotected sexual activity. This is especially true when they're teenagers. But your child also deserves to know that his sexuality is a wonderful gift, and that expressing sexual feelings in a responsible manner can be a vital and rewarding part of an adult relationship. Be sure to share your own family values about responsible healthy sexuality.