

Talk

SEX



Kids are curious. They want to know where babies come from and how bodies work. If you want to help your child learn about sexuality, this pamphlet will help you find the words.

Parents are the most important sex educators of their children

Children start the lifelong process of learning about sexuality from the time they are born. As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to help your child grow up to be a loving, caring, sexually healthy adult.



Sexuality is much more than sex. It includes our sense of who we are and how we feel about ourselves as sexual beings. You teach your child by what you do and say. The tone of your voice and the feelings you express are as important as the words you use.

Most of us grew up in families and societies that gave us confusing messages about sex. You may feel uncomfortable about talking with your child if you grew up with negative messages or confusing information.

Things to consider:

- Who talked to you about sex?
- What are your own attitudes about sex?
- How might you pass on your feelings – both positive and negative – to your child?

Why parents need to teach their children about sexuality

- Children are curious about sexuality.
- Children see things around them that are confusing. As children grow, they learn about sexuality from many sources including friends, TV, movies, Internet, video games and school.
- When you welcome their questions, children learn that they can come to you when something is confusing instead of turning to sources that may not give accurate or caring answers.
- Children need direction to learn what is acceptable and unacceptable sexual behaviour.
- Children need to learn their family and cultural values.

The growing up years



There are many sexual behaviours that are common among children. Not all children do these things. It is normal if they do and normal if they don't.

Some responses may be linked to sexual feelings and many are spontaneous reactions to other things.

Birth to age two

Children may:

- explore body parts, including the genitals
- experience pleasure from touch to all body parts, including the genitals
- begin to develop a positive or negative attitude towards their own body
- start to learn societal expectations of behaviours for boys and girls

Boys may have erections while still in their mother's uterus and girls produce vaginal lubrication shortly after birth.

You might feel anxious if your child enjoys touching his or her genitals. Some children in their first year of life even seem to have orgasms. Relax! This simply means your child's body is working well. Children have feelings about their bodies long before they can talk. As you cuddle, feed, change and talk to your child, good feelings about their bodies grow. It is easier for infants who receive a loving touch to be close to other people when they become adults.

It is important to give your child words for all parts of the body. Teach them socially acceptable and commonly understood words – penis, testicles, vulva and vagina. These are words they will keep using as they go to childcare or school.

Ages three and four

Children may:

- be curious about gender and body differences
- try to look at people and touch them when they are nude or undressing
- enjoy examining their genitals and self pleasuring (masturbation)
- engage in sex play with friends and siblings
- learn sex words including bathroom and swear words
- establish a clear belief about gender
- be curious about how babies are made and born

Children are curious about themselves and others. This may lead to sex play with other children. They are learning the differences between boys and girls – and what's the same. Most sex play is normal. However, some types might indicate sexual abuse. For example, a child may force or bribe another or there may be a big age difference between the children. If you are concerned about sex play, call a child welfare agency (ie Children's Aid; Family and Children's Service; or Community Service office) for advice or talk to your child's childcare staff, public health staff or school principal.

Ages five to eight

Children may:

- learn what is acceptable and unacceptable to adults
- use sexual language to shock, tease, joke, impress friends
- continue sex play with children of the same and/or other gender
- continue self-pleasuring (masturbation)
- try to look at people when they are undressing or pictures of naked people
- become modest

As your child learns to read and becomes more independent, you have less control over what they hear and see. It is important to find out what your child is learning. Discuss your values and feelings about the sexual messages they get from the world around them. Teach your child what is appropriate and acceptable behaviour for their age.

Ages nine to twelve

Children may:

- continue sex play and self-pleasuring (masturbation)
- seek out same-sex peer groups; often tease and chase the other gender
- start to show signs of puberty
- be more easily affected by external influences such as friends and the media
- have fantasies and crushes on people who are their age or older, same gender or opposite gender

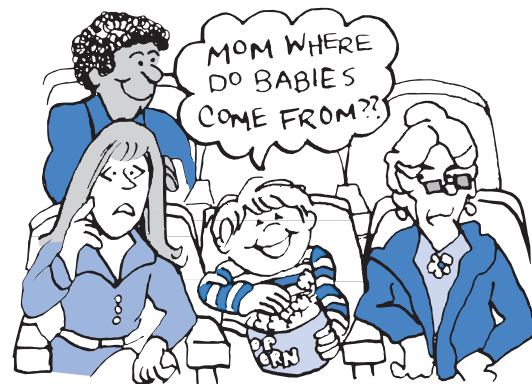


As your child realizes that their body is starting to change, they may be confused, anxious, excited – or have all of these feelings. You can help your child learn about the changes ahead by talking with them. Find a book about puberty at the library or bookstore and read it together. Talking about how you felt when you were young can make your child feel more normal and bring you closer together. Puberty education is part of the Nova Scotia school curriculum. Find out when it will be taught at school so that you can talk to your child about what they are learning.

A word about teens...

It is a normal part of development for teens to pull away from their parents while still being emotionally tied to them. Your teen may appear not to listen to you or will argue with you. Remember that you have laid the foundation for the challenge of adolescence by the values and attitudes you have already taught your child. Don't be afraid to explain your feelings to your teen and set realistic limits. Let them know you are available to listen to their concerns.

How to talk to your child about sex



Look for opportunities. Whenever a child asks a question, respond, even if the reply is, "Good question. We can talk about that later." (Don't forget to talk about it!)

When there is an opportunity – take it. You might start a discussion about something you see on TV, if you see a pregnant woman or if a pet has babies.

Remember that some children will ask questions but others will hesitate – you may need to start the conversation or ask the questions.

Make your answers honest, short and simple. You do not need to know everything about sex to teach your child what he or she wants to know. What you do not know you can find out.

Give information using words and ideas they can understand at their age.

For example, if a child asks, "Where do babies come from?"

Answer for a four-year-old: "Babies are usually made by a man and a woman and grow in a special place in the woman's body called a 'uterus'."

Answer for a nine-year-old: "Babies usually come from a man and woman having sexual intercourse. If they both want to, the man and woman get close together. Then the man slips his penis into the woman's vagina. This is called 'sexual intercourse'. Sperm comes out of the man's penis into the woman's vagina. If one sperm joins with an egg in the woman's body, the egg is fertilized. This new cell usually develops into a baby. It grows in the mother's uterus over the next nine months."

Clarify what your child really wants to know before you answer.

Child: "Where do babies come from?"

Parent: "Do you want to know where they grow?"

Child: "Why does Alice have two moms?"

Parent: "Every family is different. Some kids have one mom and one dad, some kids have 2 moms, some have 2 dads and some kids live with just one parent."

Child: "If I'm supposed to be a girl, why do I feel like I'm a boy?"

Parent: "It's okay to feel that way. It's who you feel you are on the inside that's important. I love you and want you to be yourself."

Clear up any wrong information your child may have.

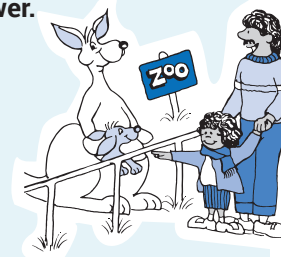
Child: "I grew in Mommy's stomach."

Parent: "You grew in Mommy's uterus, dear."

Find out how much your child already knows.

Child: "What does 'rape' mean?"

Parent: "What do you think it means?"



Find a time and place that is comfortable for you and your child such as at bedtime or when you are walking together.

Find your own words, to fit your needs and those of your child.

Acknowledge when you feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or you don't know an answer. It's okay.

Take time to think about how to answer a child's question. This could be a few minutes or a few days, as long as you help your child get an answer. You may want to talk with another adult about how you might answer a difficult question. If you aren't satisfied with the information you give or the way you handle a situation, explain this to your child and start again.

Be honest. If you give your child misinformation, sooner or later your child will learn that you didn't tell the truth. Your child could also be embarrassed by repeating incorrect information in front of others who then make fun of him or her.

"Remember when I told you that condoms are a type of balloon? Well, I know that you need to know that condoms are really used by people to keep from having a baby or getting an infection."

If two parents are raising the child, make sure you talk over what you want to say. If you find conflict between what your child is learning outside your home and your family's values you may want to reaffirm your own values. You may find it helpful to talk to your family doctor, your child's school or public health staff.

There are times when it may be better for a parent not to talk. For example, when an adult is having sexual problems, in the middle of a family crisis or when they are embarrassed, disgusted or fearful about sex. A book or pamphlet, a family friend or a trusted teacher may be a better source of information at this time.



If your child reacts strongly when you raise the subject, don't push him or her to talk more. Some parents find it easier at times like these to use a book or pamphlet – or just wait. No matter what you choose to do, make sure your child knows that you are willing to talk and listen. Keep trying different ways to start a conversation. With most kids something will eventually work!

Resources

Your local library and children's bookstore are good places to ask about books and DVDs for both children and parents.

Local Public Health Services offices and Sexual Health Centres may have staff who will speak to parents' groups.

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