
Appendix D:

Information for Parents

Appendix D contains information and suggestions that may assist parents in communicating with their children about sexual and reproductive health:

- Talking with Your Children about Sexuality
- Talking with Your Preschool and School-Aged Children about Sexuality
- Talking with Your Preteens about Sexuality
- Talking with Your Teens about Sexuality
- Suggestions for Talking with Your Teens about Sexuality
- Communication Tips for Parents

Talking with Your Children about Sexuality

Some General Guidelines

Many of us are worried about giving our children “the talk.” Actually, this “talk” ought to be a conversation that begins in our children’s infancy and continues well into their teens. It begins with the love and affection we demonstrate for our babies. It continues as they observe us with our partners, as they experience us as parents, and as we teach them the names for and the function of the parts of their bodies, talk about where babies come from, and answer their various questions over the years. By showing a willingness to discuss these topics when our children are young, we teach them that they can come to us with their questions and concerns. Although there are many influences on our children, we, as parents, remain the primary sexuality educators for our children.

If you’ve been reluctant to address these issues with your children up to this point, don’t despair! Your honesty and willingness to try will show them that you want to be one of the voices they hear on the subject of sexuality. Children do want to talk to their parents about this topic. If you don’t talk about it, how will you be able to share your values and beliefs with them? If you wait until your children are teens before you address this subject, they will probably be getting the information from someone other than you (and, depending on the source, it may or may not be accurate).

Tips to Get Started

1. **Clarify your own values about sexuality.** It’s important that you know where you stand, so that you can be clear with your children. Think about what you’d like your children to know about sex and sexuality. Sometimes we get so caught up in our concern about the negative consequences of sexual activity that we forget to talk about love, relationships, communication, and intimacy.
2. **Consider your child’s stage of development.** Make sure that you talk about things in a way that is sensitive to your child’s level of intellectual development. It is also a good idea to consider what your child is going through socially and emotionally at the time. You will find examples of children’s understanding in some of the questions asked—follow their cues. For example, preschool children are interested in factual information, but not necessarily in long explanations. The everyday situations your child experiences will also help guide your discussions. Your preteen will be very concerned about having friends, “fitting in,” and “feeling normal,” while your older adolescent may be concerned with dating relationships and different social pressures.

3. **Share your values—don't lecture or preach.** Children need to know your point of view. It is important to listen carefully to what your children have to say. Adolescents, in particular, want to make up their own minds about things. Let your children know what you believe, and why. You can try starting with, "I feel/believe that...because...." You do have a great deal of influence with your children, but they will resist if you engage them in a battle of wills. The goal is to keep the lines of communication open. If you make it easy for your children to approach you, they will. If they anticipate a lecture or an argument, they won't. Let your children know that you love them and that you always want to help, even if they do things you do not like.
4. **It's okay to feel uncomfortable.** You don't need to be a "sex expert" to help your child. The most important thing is probably the process of opening up and being willing to talk. Admit your discomfort. Your child will appreciate your honesty and your willingness to deal with a little discomfort to discuss an important subject. If you can't answer a question, suggest that you and your child find the answer together. You don't have to answer a question right away. You can acknowledge that the question is an important one and that you'd like a little more time to think about your answer. Be sure to go back to your child to continue the discussion, once you have had a chance to think.
5. **Reward questions.** Always let your children know that you're glad that they came to you with their questions (e.g., "That is a great question—I'm so glad that you came to me for an answer."). Make sure that you understand what they're really asking ("Where did I come from?" may actually mean "What city was I born in?"). Many questions that children and adolescents ask are really "Am I normal?" questions in disguise. Make sure that you answer these "hidden" questions as well. It's a good idea to find out what your children already know about the topic, so that your answer will meet their needs.
6. **Don't always wait until they ask questions.** Some children will never ask questions, but they need the same information as everyone else. Use situations that come up in everyday life to raise issues related to sexuality (e.g., "Mrs. X is going to have a baby. Did you ever wonder how that baby got started?"). Television programs that you are watching together with your children may be another way to introduce a topic for discussion.
7. **Keep your sense of humour.** You may wish to use humour to keep discussions open and light, yet informative and respectful.

Good Reasons to Start Early

By starting sexuality education early, you will

- have some time to think about your values and beliefs regarding sexuality, so you'll have a clear idea of what you'd like to share with your children
- find it easier, since you can talk about things a little at a time, and gradually build on topics you've already discussed (you won't have to talk about everything at once)
- establish a level of comfort with your children on sexuality-related topics (you'll appreciate this when they are older, and the issues become more complex)

Talking with Your Preschool and School-Aged Children about Sexuality

Starting Early Makes Sense

As parents, we truly are the primary sexuality educators for our children. We often are unaware that in the course of our daily lives we are teaching children a great deal about sexuality. Our children learn from us as we love them, care for them, guide them, and comfort them. They observe us with our partner, with our own parents, and in our roles at home, at work, and in our communities. It is within families that children learn what it means to be a boy or a girl in their culture and society. Family life is where “sexuality education” begins.

A Few Basics

- If a child is asking questions, she or he is ready to have a truthful answer. Young children are very comfortable with straightforward, factual information.
- Use “dictionary” words for body parts, in a matter-of-fact way (e.g., “Okay, now it’s time to wash your penis.”). Along with learning the correct terms (e.g., breasts, vulva, penis), your children will also learn when to use them appropriately.
- Let your children know what the term “private parts” means (generally, the body parts that are covered by a bathing suit). Children need to know that only **they** can touch their private parts, although parents or caregivers may sometimes need to help them with washing or after using the toilet. Let them know they can always talk to you about this.
- Many books and websites are available to assist you. Reading a book with your children can be a wonderful way to begin discussions.
- Some children may never ask questions, but they still need to know this information. If your child hasn’t asked about where babies come from by the age of six or seven, start thinking of ways to bring up the subject (talk about a television show where someone is pregnant, or a friend who is about to have a baby).
- Talk about masturbation as it comes up. (Don’t worry, it is normal for children to masturbate, or to touch or hold their genitals for comfort or pleasure.) Acknowledge that masturbation feels very nice, but state that it is a private activity (one’s bedroom would be appropriate).
- Some girls begin to menstruate as early as age eight or nine. Menstruation usually begins about two years after breasts begin to develop, so young girls who are experiencing breast development will need to be prepared for their first period.

Where Did I Come From?

Every parent’s heart flutters a bit when hearing the question, “Where did I come from?” Here are some ideas for approaching “the big question”:

- Reward the question (“That’s a very good question. I’m so glad you came to ask me.”).
- Your child may already have given the question some thought. You can find out what she or he already knows by saying, “That is a very good question. Where do you think you came from?” If your child says that her friend came from Thunder Bay, and she wants to know where she came from, you can exhale slowly and relax, because you’re off the hook for a little while. You could also use this as an opportunity to begin talking about when your child was born.
- You don’t necessarily have to explain everything at once. You may say something like, “You grew from a tiny egg inside my (or your mother’s) uterus. The uterus is a special place inside each woman where babies grow and develop, until they are ready to be

born.” Let your child know that the uterus is an organ in a female’s lower abdomen. Always pause after an explanation to allow your child to absorb what you’ve just said and to think about other questions (e.g., “How does the baby get out?” or “How does the baby get started?”). If your child is satisfied with your answer, you can leave it at that, or you can take the opportunity to discuss sexual intercourse if you feel the time is right. Remember that you may have to explain things over again, as your child may not take in everything you say initially. (Really, they are not just trying to torture you!)

A Few Words about Development

A child’s ability to think and understand is strongly influenced by his or her level of development. For example, preschoolers may invent explanations for things if they don’t have the correct information (also known as “magical thinking”). Slightly older children understand what is real and what is make-believe, but their thinking is very much in the “here and now” (“concrete thinking”). You can help children to understand by making connections with something they have experienced (e.g., “Remember how big Aunt Julie’s belly got before Simon was born? He was growing inside her uterus.”). Children also love to hear about when their mom was pregnant with them, and the stories surrounding their birth. Children who are adopted will also enjoy hearing how they came into their parents’ lives (although when adoptive parents choose to do this is a personal decision).

Be Patient

Many preschool and primary school-aged children also love “bathroom” humour (those delightful jokes and discussions about passing gas and other fascinating bodily functions). Remember, this too shall pass.

Questions That Children May Ask

Your children may ask questions such as “How does the baby get in there?” and “How does the baby get started?” Here is one suggestion for tackling such questions (there are many other ways to respond):

“To make a baby, you need sperm from the man and an ovum (a tiny egg) from the woman. The sperm (a special kind of seed) is made in the man’s testicles, and it comes out of his penis (the sperm uses the same tube as urine does to get out). The ova (plural for ovum) are made in the woman’s ovaries, which are inside her body, in her lower abdomen. For the sperm and the egg to get together, the man puts his penis inside the woman’s vagina. When the sperm comes out of his penis, it swims up through the uterus and into a special tube where it meets the ovum. One sperm joins with the ovum, and, a new baby has begun!”

You may want to include a few other points. For example (please include your own personal/cultural values here):

“This is a grownup activity that feels really nice for both partners, and it is one way that grownups who love each other show their love for one another.”

Although talking about sexuality with children can cause a little anxiety for parents, it is well worth the effort. You may find that the discussions you have with your child will bring the two of you closer together. You will also show your children that they can come to you when they need to talk.

For you and your child, this is a gift that lasts a lifetime.

Talking with Your Preteens about Sexuality

Preteens (9 to 12 Years)

Children in this age group are starting to become concerned with the changes of puberty, and are worried about “being normal.” This may initially be more of a concern for girls as they start maturing earlier than boys. Some girls begin menstruating as early as age nine. Menstruation usually starts about two years after breast development begins, so use this development as a guideline to make sure your daughter is prepared for her first period. Romantic attractions toward others may also become apparent, and these can sometimes cause confusion. A few children in this age group even begin to experiment with sexual activity, smoking, drugs, and alcohol.

It is very important to establish positive communication patterns with your child at this stage if you haven’t already done so. Adolescents are (or will be) experiencing strong social pressures regarding sexual activity and drugs. It is essential that your voice is heard loud and clear among the many messages preteens will receive about these issues over the next several years. Your preteen will probably be quite interested in factual, “scientific” information. The thinking of children in this age group is very much in the “here and now,” but they are gradually developing their abilities to consider consequences ahead of time, and to think about “what if” situations. Preteens generally place a high value on being the “same” as their friends, and “fitting in.”

Talking with your preteen is very important, but listening is essential. It may sometimes be difficult for a young person to open up. You can make it easier by not being critical of the things your children say, even if you don’t agree. You can “reflect” back to them what they’ve said (“Oh, so you feel that...”), and then explain how you think or feel, and why (“This is how I see the situation...I think this is important because...”). Sometimes they will just need you to listen without saying anything. If there is something you want to discuss further, you can bring it up at another time.

So What Do We Talk About?

- **Values and beliefs.** Share your values, beliefs, and cultural and spiritual traditions.
- **Puberty.** Talk about the physical and emotional changes that boys and girls experience during puberty.
- **Masturbation.** You may wish to talk about masturbation, although many people find this a very awkward topic. Many children have questions about it, and may feel that there is something dreadfully wrong with them if they masturbate. Some children do it, and some don’t—either is perfectly normal. Masturbation is healthy and not harmful, but it is a private activity (one’s bedroom would be appropriate). Some children worry that they may be masturbating too much, but if masturbation is not interfering with regular, daily activities, it is not excessive.
- **Hygiene practices.** Address topics such as shaving, deodorant, menstrual care, skin problems, and so on.
- **Love, relationships, intimacy,** communication, friends, pressures, and how to resist pressures. Let your children know that you will always pick them up if needed.

- **Refusal skills.** Discuss with your preteens how to say “no” to things they don’t want to do. Talk about situations that may come up with their friends (e.g., someone offering them a cigarette, being invited to a party at a home where there will be no adult supervision). Young people want to be able to say “no” without being teased, losing friends, or hurting anyone’s feelings, and they’ll need your help and support to figure out how to do this.
- **Body image.** Many young adolescents are worried about weight gain before their “growth spurt,” and many girls begin to diet at this age.
- **Sexual intercourse.** Talk with your children about what sexual intercourse means, if they don’t know already.
- **Consequences of sexual activity.** Discuss basic, correct information about the consequences of sexual activity: pregnancy, STI and HIV, and how they can be prevented.
- **Media messages.** The media (e.g., television, advertising) give many messages about sexuality, relationships, appearance, and how females and males should behave. Do you agree with these representations? Are they accurate?
- **Abstinence.** Talk about why you think it is a good idea for young people to wait to have sex (include your values and beliefs, and the reasons you hold them).
- **Sexual orientation.** Many adolescents feel clear about which sex they are romantically attracted to, while some may wonder, “Am I gay?” Same-sex attractions or “crushes” are fairly common during adolescence. Sexual orientation may not be fully realized until adulthood. Adolescents who are questioning their sexual orientation are especially concerned about “being normal,” and are very fearful about being rejected by their friends and families. It is important that children feel loved and accepted no matter what. They need to know that they won’t be abandoned or rejected for who they are.

Young people really do need and want to talk to their parents about sexuality, but they find it difficult to raise the topic. You can make it easier for them by bringing up the topic yourself, by asking if they’re discussing sexuality in school, by asking them questions about movies or television programs, or by leaving appropriate books or pamphlets in places where your children will see them. However you begin, you’ll be opening the door to some wonderful opportunities for communication with your children.

Talking with Your Teens about Sexuality

Teens (13 to 19 Years)

If you've been talking with your children and preteens about sexuality all along, discussing it during their teen years should be a little easier. If you haven't approached the subject yet, it's time to get started! Adolescents are under a great deal of social pressure to become sexually active, and many are under the impression that everyone their age is having sex. Teens need to hear that it is perfectly normal not to be sexually active, and they need to hear your voice along with all the other messages they receive about sexuality.

A Word about Development

Adolescent desire for independence sometimes fools us into thinking that our teenage children do not need us anymore. Nothing could be further from the truth. Teens need a secure foundation, a "safe haven" from which to try out new skills, privileges, and responsibilities. Anything that parents can do to maintain (or work toward) a strong, positive relationship with their children will also help teens make healthy choices for themselves. Spending time together, getting involved in activities as a family, or just "being there" for your teen can make a big difference.

Talking about Sexuality

As adolescents work to "construct" a personal identity for themselves (one of the many developmental tasks of adolescence), they consider what they think and how they feel about things. They are very sensitive to others telling them what to do or what to think. (Perhaps you've experienced some of this resistance already.) It is important to share your views, beliefs, and values without insisting that your child automatically adopt them. If you offer up your values for consideration, rather than trying to impose them, you avoid having your teen reject your values simply to exert independence. Your children need you to listen to their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. It may be difficult for them to open up if they anticipate a lecture from you, based on something they've shared with you. Parents do have a powerful influence on their teens. Our parental influence has the most effect, however, when it is subtle, when we offer our opinions, or when we demonstrate our values through our actions.

So What Do We Talk About?

- **Love, intimacy, and relationships.** Talk about how love, sexuality, and relationships are represented on television and in advertising. Are these images positive? Are they accurate? How do they make us feel about ourselves?
- **Abstinence.** Promote abstinence as the most effective way to prevent pregnancy, STIs, and HIV. Discuss other reasons why choosing to wait may be a wise choice for your teen.
- **Puberty.** Your child may still have a lot of questions about the changes associated with puberty.
- **Prevention.** Even if you've made it clear that you would prefer that your teen wait to have sex, she or he still needs information about how to prevent pregnancy, STIs, and HIV (e.g., information about contraception, condoms, and where people may gain access to them). Both boys and girls need to have this information.

- **Contraception.** People who decide to have sex must always use effective contraception and condoms. Condom use can prevent pregnancy and diseases, if used correctly and consistently (although there is no guarantee).
- **Values.** Encourage your teen to think about his or her own values and limits (your teen may or may not wish to share these with you), and to consider how he or she would communicate these to a partner.
- **Communication.** Discuss ways to handle situations when feeling pressured (this may be related not only to sex, but also to alcohol, drugs, or other risky behaviour). Let your teen know that you will always be available for a safe ride home if needed.
- **Sexual orientation.** This is a difficult topic for many parents. Adolescence is the time when romantic attractions become apparent, and some young people may be feeling very confused by their feelings. Many young people go through a stage when they wonder, “Am I gay?” Same-sex attractions are normal for this period in a young person’s life. Sexual orientation may not be fully established until adulthood. In the meantime, teens need (as we all do) the unconditional love and support of their parents.
- **Sexual assault (acquaintance rape).** Everyone has the right to say “no” to sexual activity of any kind. It is sexual assault to force another person into any sexual activity. Boys and girls need to communicate clearly, and they must understand that “no” means “no.” If a teen is drunk or high, he or she may not be able to give consent to sexual activity. Boys and girls need to consider the role that drugs and alcohol play in this kind of sexual assault. Being drunk is not a defence when someone is accused of sexual assault.

Teens do want to talk with their parents about sexuality, but this can be a delicate and sometimes awkward undertaking for parents. Your teen will appreciate your efforts to tackle difficult subjects with them, even if it costs you a little of your composure. You might begin by asking your teen about his or her thoughts and feelings. If your teen seems reluctant to talk, don’t give up! Try to approach the topic in a roundabout way. Talking while the two of you are engaged in another activity may take off a little pressure. Leave appropriate books out in a place where your teen is sure to see them. A drive in the car may be another opportunity to discuss the topic. While driving you don’t always have to look at each other, and a little silence while you look out of the window may be welcome.

How you begin talking with your teens is up to you. The most important thing, though, is that you do initiate the conversation about sexuality, and show that you care about this important aspect of their lives.

Suggestions for Talking with Your Teens about Sexuality

It is important to have discussions about sexuality issues with your children. By talking about sexuality, you are showing that it is an important issue. Teens may appear more knowledgeable about sexuality issues than they really are; and they still want and need parental input. Remember, when you talk to your children, preteens, and teens about sexuality and related issues, you are telling them in a very real way that you care about them. It's never too late to start.

Some Suggestions

- Talk things over with your partner/spouse or friends to help you clarify issues and the messages you want to give your children.
- Recognize that the cultural climate in which we live promotes a “live now, grow up fast” sexual philosophy. Share your beliefs with your teen. The values you live by, and the discussions you have, are important.
- Don't be afraid to say you're embarrassed or uncomfortable. Often just saying so will make you and your teen more comfortable.
- Respect each other's privacy. Make it clear that you want to discuss information, choices, and opinions—not your sexual experiences or theirs.
- Try to listen calmly, even when there is a difference of opinion. If you really listen to your children you'll learn a lot about what they think. They'll also feel heard, and that goes a long way toward building their self-esteem. Be willing to stop, and to discuss the topic again later if the discussion gets too heated.
- Sometimes we are not ready for our children's questions/challenges. It's all right to say, “That's a good question. I need to think about my answer for a while.” At other times, you may need to reconsider a response you've given earlier, “I thought about what I said yesterday and I want to change something.”
- Try not to jump to conclusions when your children ask a question such as, “How do you know if you're pregnant?” Answer such questions factually and calmly. Ask them what they know and think about the issue.
- Learn about the facts, but be prepared to talk about more than just the facts. Teens also want to know about things such as the relationship issues involved with sexual decision making, alternatives to sexual intercourse, and how to talk honestly with friends/partners about sex, birth control, and condom use.
- Discuss the range of behaviours that are part of a sexual relationship, and talk about protection from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy.
- Encourage your children (son or daughter) to set their own limits. Stress the importance of clearly communicating those limits to a partner.
- Talk about abuse and assault. If your teen discloses abuse, remember never to blame her or him for the assault.

Getting Started

- Choose a time when both you and your child/teen are relaxed and have time to talk.
- Discuss issues when you're doing some activity together—travelling in a car, preparing a meal, washing dishes, or doing other chores around the house.
- Leave appropriate books and magazine articles on a variety of sexuality issues lying around the house for your children to read.
- Give a book or magazine article you've read to your teen and ask for his or her opinion.
- Post a newspaper clipping on the fridge and ask for the family's feedback on it.
- Watch a television show or movie together. Discuss the values and any (mis)information either you or your child thinks is important.
- Conduct interviews of each other to find out what each of you knows and believes. This is one way of giving both of you an equal opportunity to talk (and listen!).
- Ask about what your teen is learning at school (e.g., "Somebody at work said his daughter's class discussed condoms. What information have you received at school about condoms?").
- Find a regular time to be with each of your children so that there are built-in opportunities for discussion and sharing.

Door Openers

- "What do you think?"
- "That's a good question."
- "I'm trying to understand what you're feeling."
- "Do you know what that word means?"
- "I'm glad you told me about that."

Door Slammers!

- "You're too young."
- "Where did you hear that?"
- "If you say that word again I'll..."
- "That's none of your business."
- "I don't care what your friends are doing."
- "That's just for boys (girls)."
- "We'll talk about that when you need to know."
- "You'll understand when you're older."

Communication Tips for Parents

- **Be honest** when talking about conception or birth.
- **Talk about humans.** Talking only about animals is confusing when your child wants to know about people. Help your child understand the similarities and differences.
- **Listen to your child.** When your child approaches you with a question or concern, stop and listen. Hold your own immediate reaction (shock, advice, solutions) while you explore what she or he is trying to say.
- **Give clear expectations.** Use correct names for parts of the body and body functions. Children need a language to use when talking about their feelings, ideas, and concerns.
- **Show your respect.** Stop what you are doing, move toward your child, and move to his or her level.
- **Be patient.** Expect the same questions and concerns to come up repeatedly. Children have difficulty grasping some information. They often need repeated reassurance about the changes they are going through.
- **Get to know your child's environment.** Take note of your children's current jokes, the programs they're watching, their music—these will provide opportunities to discuss sexuality issues.
- **Introduce the topic of sexuality.** Bringing up issues from time to time will give the message that you are interested in discussing sexuality. Your child may put you off (“Oh Dad” or “Yuck!”), but that doesn't necessarily mean he or she knows it all or doesn't want to talk.
- **Keep the door open.** Let your child know that you are available for other conversations or questions on this topic.

Messages Worth Repeating

- All of us are growing and changing throughout our lives.
- Everyone develops in his or her own way.
- Your way is unique and special and valid.
- Everyone's body is private and deserves respect.
- Sexuality is a beautiful gift—something to be handled wisely.

Notes