

Talking to Your Kids About Sex

Table of Contents

- [When to start talking with kids about sex.](#)
- [Appropriate topics to teach a child about sexuality.](#)
- [What to do when a child touches their genitals.](#)
- [What to do when a child walks in when a couple is having sex.](#)
- [Childhood sexual play.](#)
- [How to talk with a child about puberty.](#)
- [What to do when a parent suspects their child is sexually active.](#)
- [How to talk with a child about online pornography.](#)
- [Sexuality education children receive at school.](#)
- [Know what your child is learning about sex at school.](#)
- [How to protect a child from sexual abuse.](#)
- [Sharing your values about sex.](#)
- [What to do when a child asks a parent questions about their sexuality.](#)
- [What to do if you think a child is gay.](#)

When to start talking with kids about sex.

Talking about sexuality makes many parents feel nervous, as many are unsure of the best time to begin. Ideally, sexuality education starts in infancy; however, no matter what the age of your child, talking now is better than never.

You may be wondering how you're supposed to teach your infant about sexuality when they can only coo. Whether you realize it or not, however, you're providing verbal and nonverbal messages about sexuality as you interact with your child: For example, holding your child in a nurturing way demonstrates love, letting them explore if they touch themselves during a diaper change teaches them that it is okay to touch their body, and using proper terms for their genitals sets the foundation for them to be knowledgeable about their anatomy. These scenarios, known as "teachable moments," are daily opportunities to set a sex-positive tone.

As your child becomes a toddler, situations may present themselves that can lead to a new set of "teachable moments," or you might want to bring up various topics if your child isn't inquiring. Common themes to discuss during these ages include: explaining the difference between "good" touch and "bad" touch, using proper names for all body parts including the genitals, explaining how babies are made, explaining the differences between girls and boys, and a whole lot more.

The pre-tween, tween and teen years bring other topics to the forefront, such as puberty, crushes, dating, abstinence, sex, contraception, sexual health, sexually explicit materials, the media, body image and self-esteem. Your children want to hear the facts, your values and viewpoints. And they want you to listen to what they have to say, too.

Appropriate topics to teach a child about sexuality.

Some kids ask a lot of questions about sex. Others never broach the subject with their parents, and the parents may need to initiate conversations. Either way, many parents worry about overloading their kids with details about sexual topics—especially topics that they worry their children may not yet be "ready" to learn yet. A common concern is that kids, armed with information, will be more apt to become sexually involved. Well, fear not: One study, *Emerging Answers 2007: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, reports that about two-thirds of evaluated sexuality education programs in the U.S. have positive effects on teen sexual behavior—delaying the initiation of intercourse, improving contraceptive use, or both.

It's also important to realize that talking about sexuality isn't telling kids how to have sex. It addresses a range of topics that build the foundation for them to become sexually healthy adults, which may include communicating your values about sexuality, talking to your children about the relationship between sex and love, sharing information about reducing the risk of STIs, or explaining what HIV is and how it can (and cannot) be transmitted.

The reality is that your child will give you clues if you're telling them too much: hands over the ears, saying things like "la, la, la" as you're talking, flat-out telling you "that's enough" or "too much information." If you're not sure what's age-appropriate, or if you want to gauge your child's knowledge, ask them what they think. Hearing their answer, you'll know if they want and need a simple explanation, or something more in-depth. The key is to let them know you are open, comfortable and "askable," so when they are ready they can look to you as their primary source for sexuality information.

What to do when a child touches their genitals.

It is completely natural for children of any age to touch their own genitals. Some girls and boys are simply exploring their bodies, and others touch themselves because it feels good. Young children may rub their bodies against stuffed animals, pillows, blankets, or they may use their hands to touch their genitals. As long as they are not experimenting with objects that can hurt their reproductive anatomy, it's considered a healthy behavior.

Age-appropriate sex-positive responses to a child touching his or her genitals include: In infancy, reiterate the proper name of the body part (vulva and vagina or penis), and let your child know in a positive tone that it's okay for them to explore their body. You can say something like "that's your penis" or "that's your vulva." For toddlers and young children, use proper names for body parts and let your child know it can feel good to touch themselves. Emphasize that self-touch is something that's done in a private place, like their bedroom. You can say something like, "I know that touching yourself can feel good, but it's something to do in private. Your room is a private place. Why don't you go to your room, and when you are ready, you'll join us in the family room."

For older children, respect their private time, and talk about the benefits of masturbation. It can be addressed as a way to relieve sexual feelings during puberty. You can say something like, "You're at an age when your body is going to be changing physically and emotionally. You may start to feel sexually excited due to hormones that are produced during puberty. Masturbation is a healthy way to make yourself feel good. It's okay if you masturbate, and it's okay if you don't." If an adolescent is sexually active, you could talk about mutual masturbation as a way to experience intimacy, to prevent pregnancy or STIs and learn about their bodies.

If you truly oppose masturbation, instead of pushing your toddler's hand away from their genitals, gently move it from the area. Or instead of saying something to your adolescent like, "that's disgusting," share your values on the topic and explain why you believe so. What's considered unhealthy is attaching guilt or shame to masturbation. Some reasons why: Shame can make people feel bad about their bodies, can make it harder to talk to one's health care provider about important sexual health or reproductive health matters, and can even cause sexual problems once they're in adult relationships. Helping your child to feel good about their body is a wonderful gift to them.

What to do when a child walks in when a couple is having sex.

It is not uncommon for children to walk in when their parents are in the throes of passion. One way to prevent this situation is to establish boundaries related to privacy in your home when your child is young. This can include teaching them to knock on the door and wait for permission before entering. Or, if need be, lock your door so that you can focus on your partner and not worry about having your child walk into your room unannounced—even though you may need to stop if the child calls out.

If this scenario becomes a reality, however, and your child walks in on you having sex, it is important to remain calm. Through a child's eyes, it could seem like one person is hurting the other, especially hearing moans and groans and not realizing that these sounds are about pleasure. If your child does walk in on you, gently tell your child that everything is okay, ask them to leave the room, and let them know that you will be out in a minute. Grab a robe, and explain to your child what was happening in simple terms. You can say something like, "Mommy and I were sharing special time together kissing and touching—something grown-ups who are in love sometimes do." Then ask if they have any questions, and let your child know that when they have questions about anything, they can come to you for answers.

Childhood sexual play.

When we see young children exploring in "sex play" of any kind, we tend to interpret their actions as if they were adults. More often than not, young children are innocently exploring out of curiosity without any sexual connotation. This can include "I'll show you mine if you show me yours" and playing doctor. Children may engage in this type of play with same-sex or other-sex friends—which is common and natural.

When a parent is caught off-guard by same-sex play, their first thought may be that their child is gay or lesbian. Usually, however, it's a product of the gender that a child interacts with the most. If you find your child playing with another child in this way, your verbal and nonverbal reaction both can send powerful messages. Handling the situation calmly, asking the kids to get dressed or to stop playing in that way, and letting them know why by saying something like, "Areas of the body that are covered with underwear are private, and not to be touched by anyone but Mommy, Daddy, the doctor and you."

How to talk with a child about puberty.

Whether you realize it or not, you have the tools to talk to your child about puberty. After all, though it might have been a long time ago, you went through puberty, too!

Begin by letting your child know that their bodies will be going through changes as they experience puberty. Ideally, you will want to bring puberty up casually rather than having a formal discussion. You can use teachable moments such as a recent growth

spurt, crush, voice change or the sudden need for deodorant, pimple medication or shaving cream as a starting point. Then, share your experiences with puberty, who you felt comfortable talking with, how you felt as your body changed, what you wish you knew that no one told you and more.

It is important to emphasize that everybody experiences these changes at their own pace. Find out what they are learning in school, what they know, and what they might fear or need more information about. It is also a good time for you to brush up on the facts. You can prep beforehand, or research topics together. Most of all, let your child know that you are a trusted and comfortable source for their sexuality (and other) questions and concerns.

What to do when a parent suspects their child is sexually active.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about half of U.S. teens in ninth to twelfth grade have had sexual intercourse. If your child is sexually active, it is most important to make sure they are well-informed about matters of the heart as well as safer sex. Think of the important points that you want to share with your child. Maybe you want them to know that if they are having sex, your hope is for them to always use protection to prevent pregnancy and reduce the risk of STIs.

You might want them to know that even though you would prefer they wait until they were older, you are here for them if they have questions, concerns or feelings they want to share. Starting this type of conversation isn't easy. Pick a time when you think your child will be most receptive. Let them know your hunch, without being accusatory, and see what they say. Then share your messages in such a way that your child knows without a doubt that you are a source of support, rather than strife.

How to talk with a child about online pornography.

It's hard enough to keep kids from exposure to sexual content in the real world, let alone in an infinite virtual space. If you teach your child about respect, boundaries and how to critically decipher the positive from the negative images, they will be off to a good start. It's important to understand that often kids look at porn because they're simply curious about bodies and sex.

Before talking with your child, consider your values about sexually explicit materials. You can start the conversation by creating a teachable moment the next time you see your child at the computer. Say something like, "I know that sometimes when I use the computer sexually explicit images can pop up without any warning." Or "Sometimes I type in the wrong URL by accident and it turns out to be a porn site. Has this happened to anyone you know?" Since the approach doesn't accuse them of anything, they'll likely be open to responding. Then you can share how these images make you feel and what you want them to know. Broaden the conversation to include magazines, billboards and other images that are hyper-sexualized.

Sexuality education children receive at school.

Each state has its own mandate related to sexuality, HIV and STI education. Some don't have guidelines related to how sex ed is taught in schools. As of March 2008, 33 states have accepted federal funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs. Programs that have received any of the \$1 billion that the federal government has allocated thus far must provide matching state dollars, and follow strict guidelines. As stated in a report by the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform, AOUM programs often contain "false, misleading, or distorted information about sexual health."

Additionally, a report by Mathematica Policy Research Inc.—on behalf of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—found no evidence that AOUM programs increase rates of teen sexual abstinence, among other findings.

Other states want students to have a comprehensive sexuality education that addresses abstinence, as well as contraception and many other topics. Research studies of comprehensive sexuality education programs show a delay in the initiation of sex, reduction of the number of sexual partners, and an increase in condom or contraceptive use.

There can also be local laws regarding these topics. So long as no AOUM funding has been accepted by a school, it can then make its own decisions about what to offer for sexuality education. Many sex ed programs fall somewhere in between AOUM and comprehensive. These programs can include medically accurate STI prevention and contraceptive information, and may be called abstinence-plus or abstinence-based. One national study by National Public Radio, The Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University's Kennedy School found only 15 percent of Americans believe that schools should only teach abstinence from sexual intercourse and should not provide information on how to obtain and use condoms and other contraception. Where do you stand?

Know what your child is learning about sex at school.

To find out what your child is (or isn't) being taught about sex, start by asking your child what they are learning in school. Then you can contact your child's teacher and the principal of the school to find out more specific details about the sex ed program and the type of training teachers receive. Let them know you want to review the curricula and other materials that are given out in the classroom.

If you want your school to do more, see how they match up to the state mandate, and speak your mind to your local, city, state and federal officials. On the local level, see if there is a health curricula review committee and get involved. Advocate for other parents to join the cause to bring about change for a more comprehensive program that will prepare the kids in your community to become sexually healthy adults.

How to protect a child from sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse is a very real threat to our children—both girls and boys. While states have sex offender registries to raise awareness and provide information to concerned families, parents still need to educate their kids and arm them with tools to recognize when they are in unsafe situations.

When children are young, the best defense is teaching kids the difference between "good" touch and "bad" touch. Plenty of children's books cover this topic; parents can use them to start the conversation, explaining to their child which body parts are private. This can be a particularly rich time for parents to try using correct words for genitals, and convey their feelings and values related to touching, sexuality and boundaries. Children need to know when and how to say "No!" and to run away if someone touches them in a way that makes them feel funny or uncomfortable, and tell a trusted adult.

It can help to talk to your children and, together, identify trusted adults or safe places that they can go for help. Most important, kids need to know if someone does this to them, it is not their fault.

For older kids, sexual harassment and assault should also be discussed. They need to know the fine line between flirting and harassment, tips for reducing the risk for abusive encounters, how to communicate about sexual choices and feelings, and what to do if they or someone they know is abused, harassed or assaulted.

Sharing your values about sex.

Many parents have strong religious or cultural values that dictate what they believe—and what they want for their children's personal lives. One of the most effective ways to talk with your kids about sex is to have ongoing, open conversations that encourage them to share, rather than you telling them what you want them to do (or not do).

Start by asking a question to see what your child thinks about any sex-related topic. Maybe start the discussion as a result of a television show that you are watching together that tackles a sexual storyline. Let your child know your messages and values, and why you have these particular beliefs and feelings.

If you are talking about abstinence, which can mean different things to different people, define abstinence together so that you are both on the same page. Find out what your child thinks is realistic for teens today.

Ultimately, the less you put a child on the spot about what they are individually experiencing, the more likely they will share with you. It may also help to find out what your child's group of friends might be experiencing in relation to peer pressure, decision making and sexual activity. This can be an insight into of your child's support network. Let your child know that while these are your family's values, and you hope they stick to them, you are available to talk about the pros and cons of any sexuality topic and to support them in making healthy decisions.

What to do when a child asks a parent questions about their sexuality.

At some point, your child or teenager will likely want to know when you had sex for the first time, with whom you have had sex (or with how many people), and other questions that may make you squirm—or even make you feel proud. Many parents find themselves in the position of "do as I say, and not as I have done."

If and when these questions come up, you'll have to decide if it's better to be honest, or to let them know you don't think it's appropriate to answer, using this as a teachable moment to talk about boundaries and comfort zones, and respecting other people's decisions to share some - but perhaps not all - information about one's sexual life. In some cases, sharing this information can be significant, as it can make a case supporting what you want for your child; however, it can also work against you. The key is to be clear as to why you are sharing the information, and about the lessons that you have learned from your experiences.

What to do if you think a child is gay.

Parents have many hopes and dreams for their children. For many parents, these dreams include seeing their child have a loving relationship, get married and have children of their own. When a parent wonders if their child is gay or lesbian, they may feel this vision is shattered, particularly that they may not be able to have children. It may also conflict with their values and beliefs of "right" and "wrong."

The reality is that your child may or may not consider themselves to be gay, and the reason you think they may be gay can be based on stereotypical assumptions. If your child is younger, let them be who they are without labeling what you think they might be. If your child is older, at the age when crushes, dating, and other scenarios can create teachable moments, then use these to open a dialogue. Maybe you have a gay or lesbian relative, friend or neighbor who you can bring up and talk about what life might be like for them.

Even if your child is gay, and you give them the opportunity to "come out," they still might not feel comfortable sharing this part of themselves with you. Realize that what you say in these conversations and how you say it will give your child an indication of where you stand on the topic and your ability to be supportive. Be sure to let your child know that you love them no matter their sexual orientation.

If your child does identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, consider asking them how you can best be supportive, and whether there are any books, community groups or websites that they would like you to read to learn more about their experiences.

Last Updated: 07/15/2010

This section created and produced exclusively by the editorial staff of GoodInBed.com. © 2010 Good in Bed LLC; all rights reserved.