

TACKLING TOUGH TOPICS — *“What should we say?”*

Parents who are prepared to answer the most frequently asked questions will be less uncomfortable and more willing to talk with their children.

Parents have the responsibility and the opportunity to be their child's primary sexuality educator. All parents need to decide when and what to say to their child about God's gift of sexuality. Some parents are blessed with very open children who are filled with questions. Other parents find their child not only has no questions but has no desire to talk about the subject.

Facts and values: Parents need to discuss both

While many sexuality education programs focus on pregnancy and STDs, very few discuss morals, values, and/or religious beliefs. Children need to know not only the *facts* of life but the underlying *values*. Don't rely totally on your child's school. While school-based sexuality education may be technically accurate, it cannot accommodate diverse cultural and religious traditions. Prepare for these discussions by finding a good book that reflects your attitudes and beliefs about sexuality.

Your goal: Begin a dialogue

Encourage your child to ask questions and to keep asking questions. The goal should be to start a dialogue and keep the dialogue going.

The best way to encourage questions is to prepare a three-step response to any sexuality question you are asked:

1. No matter what your child asks you, pause calmly and thank your child for coming to YOU with the question. Never have your child believe she/he made a mistake by asking. Kids say the #1 reason they do not ask parents questions is that they are afraid parents will say, “Why are you asking me THAT?” Others fear that parents will think they are planning to do something or have already done something. You can say, “I'm glad you've asked me.”

2. Tell your child, "That is a very good question." Children worry that the question is bad, dumb or silly. Younger children worry that their bodies and sex may be bad or nasty. Older kids don't want to appear dumb asking questions about things they believe they should already know. Young and older children both need encouragement to ask questions. Parents can say, "The only dumb question is the one you do NOT ask." Explain that children can't be confident unless they are sure that they have the correct answers to their questions.

3. Learn more about the question by saying, "I want to be sure I understand your question. Did this come up at school? Is it something you heard or saw on TV or in a movie, read in a newspaper?" As with any question, it's helpful for you to understand what concerns are behind the question and what the child already knows. One mother's story demonstrates how important it is to do this before answering any question. She shared that her six-year old son asked, "Mom, what's a period?" Although she was both shocked and unprepared, she thanked her son for asking, acknowledged that it was a good question and asked where the question came from. Her son replied, "In school the teacher writes on the board and uses a period. I want to know, what is a period?"

This three-step approach increases the likelihood that your child will come to you with other concerns and questions. It also gives your heart time to quiet down and helps you plan your answer.

Caught by Surprise?

The location where your child asks the question may surprise you. You may be on the check-out line at the supermarket, at dinner with grandparents, at a soccer game with younger siblings, or on the line to get tickets for a movie. In each case the spur of the moment question does not give parents time to prepare their answer and whatever is discussed will not be a private conversation. What to do? Let your child know you are glad she/he asked the question and then, let them know that right now you don't have enough time to answer the question. Next, pick a better location and time with your child; when we get home; after dinner; before you go to bed tonight. This will give privacy and enough time to talk with your child. This also gives parents time to plan their answer.

Slang Terms

Be prepared for slang terms, especially terms to describe male and female body parts, to say nothing of the dreaded "F" word. Often children need to use slang terms to ask their questions. One father reported that before discussing masturbation with his son, he asked him if he knew what the word meant. His son gave his dad a blank stare and said, "I don't know what that word means." When the dad began the discussion, the son smiled and said, "Dad, I know all about that. We call it "choking the chicken."

If parents have not already taught their child anatomical terms, this is the time to start. Children often get the wrong message when parents call the nose the nose and the elbow the elbow but refer to all the parts "down there" by childish words instead of the correct terms. This is confusing and may account for the number-one question third graders ask, "Is sex good or bad?" Many children are uncomfortable talking about their bodies. Some have received the wrong message as they use the words "mean," "nasty" and "dirty" to describe sexual body parts.

Although parents are often uncomfortable calling a breast a breast, the correct term shows more respect for the body than slang terms. One mom told her kids, "We only call body parts by the names that God gave them." This is a unique approach but it teaches respect and establishes a "no slang policy" in the family. This is also an opportunity to ask what other slang terms children have heard. Then parents can discuss the messages that are given by these terms and how they make people feel.

The "don't talk with me about THAT" child

Some parents have children who never ask questions and resist every attempt parents make to talk with them about their body (puberty education) and then about sex (sexuality education). More often than not, this occurs when parents have waited too long to talk with their child. As kids get older they have more media exposure and have heard so much more from their peers. They begin to get confused about sexual topics and less open to discussion with their parents. All of this leads them to question if their bodies are good or bad and then if sex is good or bad. No wonder some kids are afraid and others are embarrassed that their parents want to talk about these topics.

Good parent preparation is even more essential if a child does not want to talk or ask questions. Parent programs can provide a list of the questions and concerns at each child's grade level ([See Kid's Questions – Collecting Questions](#)). The best preparation comes from the opportunity to talk with and learn from other parents. Parents' anxiety lessens as they prepare and practice answering potential questions. No parent is expected to go over every question with their child. The list simply serves as a parent study guide. These are topics their child may be hearing in the school yard. Parents can decide if their child is ready for the answers. Parent programs can also help parents prepare for their child's questions by providing a list of books and web sites.

No matter how much parents prepare, children may still cover their ears or even leave the room. If this happens, parents can give their child a "rain check" and try again. Some kids are more comfortable with a sibling, a different parent or both parents present. Ask them what would make them more comfortable but let them know that this is part of your job as a parent. Parents are responsible for protecting their children. When kids are young, they have to learn basic safety, not putting things into electric sockets and not putting small things into their mouths. As they get older, parents teach children to use seat belts and wear a helmet when riding a bike. Now is the time to teach children about their bodies, what is normal, how to take care of their body and when to see a doctor; even if the child and parent may be embarrassed in the beginning. Parents can reassure their child and themselves that "This will be kind of weird at first, but the more we talk about it, the easier it will get ([See Parents' Answers – How to....Communication Tips](#)).

It helps if parents can share a story about themselves when they were their child's age. A story that shares a parent's embarrassment, confusion or misinformation lets children know that their uncomfortable feelings are NORMAL. Then, parents can admit that many parents and kids are not comfortable talking about certain body parts. This is OK and instead of it being negative, it is recognition that all body parts are not the same and certain body parts are special. This is why we cover them up and do not allow others to touch them. It is out of respect, not because something is wrong ([See Parents' Answers – Inappropriate Touch](#)).

Where and how to talk with your child?

Many parents report that the family car is the best place to talk with their child. Both are a captive audience with privacy and, more importantly, no eye contact. It is usually easier to discuss personal topics without eye contact. Kids report that "cuddle time," in their bed, before going to sleep, is a great private, quiet time to talk with parents. Some families prefer times away from the busy house: a walk after dinner; taking the dog to the vet; raking leaves together; or even a special parent-child camping trip. Don't pass up opportunities when you see a new baby or a pregnant mom. This is a chance to say, "The baby reminds me that we need to talk about some personal things." Then plan your time for a talk.

One of the easiest ways to begin a discussion is to "rent a baby," i.e., offer to baby-sit for a friend. Diaper changing time or bath time is the perfect opportunity to talk with your child about the differences between boys and girls. If you have a family of boys, "rent" a baby girl. You can share stories from when your child was a baby. One mom said, "When you were little you could not say the word penis so you called it a Now that you are older, it is time for you to learn the real names for the parts of your body."

Some other approaches:

Direct - "When can we talk? It's my job to be sure you have the right information."

Round-About - Talk about someone you know or something you heard. "Did you hear the story about...on the news?"

Focus on values - "The news stories about ... can be confusing, I would like talk with you about what we believe."

Write a Note - Ask your child to let you know their questions or what they think kids their age need to know about sex. Writing may be less threatening than talking.

Use the TV - Bring up the subject when you see someone wearing tight clothes or making out on TV ([See Resources - "But I'm Almost 13"](#)).

“Alarm Questions” and what to do about them.

There are four types of “alarm questions.”

1. The question that embarrasses you – The question can be as simple as, “Mom, why do I have hair growing...?” If you are embarrassed or feel awkward, be open about it. Your child probably feels the same as you do. Try one of these comments: “This is really tough for me. My parents never talked about this kind of thing, but I want it to be different with us.”

2. The question you do not know how to answer – No matter how prepared a parent is, no parent can answer every question. Accept it, be honest with your child and be ready with your resources. One mom shared the night her husband was on a trip and her eleven year old son asked, “Mom, when will I be old enough to have wet dreams.” She took three deep breaths and answered, “I’m glad you asked me. It’s a great question. Is this something you heard about in school?” Her son said, “No, Jack (a friend on their block) told me his brother has wet dreams. I want to know when I will be old enough to have wet dreams.” Still surprised but more prepared, she answered, “Mom is a girl and I don’t know. We can ask dad when he comes home.” If you aren’t sure of the answer, be honest. Thank your child for asking and let him/her know you want some extra time so you can give the best answer. Then try the library, the internet, your pediatrician, your child’s teacher or school counselor or your clergy.

3. The question with an answer your child is not ready to hear – This is a “to be continued question” where the child will have to wait until he/she is older before getting the answer. Parents have to trust their feelings on this. If the alarm goes off and you do not think your child is ready for the answer, do NOT answer the question. Your child may object but once you say too much, you cannot take it back.

This applies to younger children’s questions about oral sex, how an abortion is performed, what homosexual persons actually do and how people get AIDS from sex. Even if your children have not been exposed to these things through the media and the internet, many of their class mates will share what they have seen or heard. You cannot protect your child from this, so you need to welcome their questions and be prepared with your answers.

For example, a fourth grader may ask, "Mom, what's oral sex?" You can emphasize there is nothing wrong in asking the question, but it is an "eighth grade question." This is a question that will be easier to understand when he/she is older. One mom told her young son the answer was like his older brother's math homework. He knew 4th grade math but could not understand his brother's algebra and geometry homework. She stated when he is older and the answer will make more sense, she will answer the question.

The story of the "Three Little Pigs" can help children understand that a parent wants to build a foundation before answering a question. Parents can ask what the first and second pigs' houses were built with and what happened to them. Then ask about the third pig's house. Then state you want to build a foundation with bricks. This will take longer and means some questions will be answered later after the child has the foundation of more knowledge.

4. The question about your own personal sexual experiences – Children may ask, "Mom, how old were you when you had sex for the first time." Some parents think that by sharing their sexual mistakes, they can prevent their child from repeating them. This approach confuses children and causes them to say their parents are hypocrites. They ask, "Why can't I have sex, my parents did it before they were married and they turned out OK?"

With these questions, parents need to take two deep breaths before saying, "That is a very interesting question and I am glad that you have asked me but it is not a question that I want to answer." This is an opportunity to talk about appreciating the privileged communication between loving adults and respecting personal privacy. Please resist the temptation to share your personal experiences. You can share what you learned from your experiences in a story about what happened to a friend.

The need for "Ground Rules"

Kids say the number one reason they are afraid to talk with parents about sex is that they are afraid parents will think they are doing something wrong or planning to have sex. The second reason is kids are afraid parents will embarrass them by telling others what they asked. Two simple "ground rules" can lessen these fears and encourage questions.

Rule 1: If the child asks a question, the parent promises not to judge the child or get angry. This means not challenging the child with comments like, “Why are you asking THAT.” This non-anger policy also applies if the child needs to use slang terms to ask the question.

Rule 2: The parent promises not to share their child’s questions on the phone with grandma or an aunt (no matter how “cute” they think the comment was) or tell another parent in the school yard.

Giving parents a “heads-up” on the students’ concerns and questions

If kids do not get information from their parents, they will ask friends or search the internet. In fact, the number one topic that students search for on the internet is sex. Forty-four percent of young people said they use the internet to get answers to sexual questions ([See Internet Safety](#)).

Schools can help parents and students by letting them know it’s normal for kids to be curious about sex and normal for both parents and kids to be uncomfortable talking about it. As already stated, schools can let parents know the students’ concerns and questions. This can be done by giving students index cards and asking them to write their questions on one side and what kids their age need to know on the other. Some students who are uncomfortable asking questions are very comfortable listing the items kids their age need to know about sex. A typed list can be given to the parents to let them know their child’s class’s concerns and questions ([See Kids’ Questions - Collecting Students’ Questions](#)).

What kids are asking

Twelve years of students’ questions reflect many disturbing trends. Younger students are asking questions that would once be asked by much older students. President Clinton, television, movies, the music industry and clothing manufacturers like Abercrombie and Fitch are sexualizing our children at younger and younger ages. Today children are very vulnerable. The volume and content of their questions indicate their need to talk with parents and get the right answers. And kids prefer to get the information from their parents ([See Kids’ Questions - Parents](#)).

Programs to encourage parents to learn from each other

Schools and religious education programs can sponsor parent programs. These programs benefit from the teachers' presence. Parents can hear the teachers' observations and concerns. Teachers can also add a dose of reality if a parent responds, to another parent's question with "Oh no. That would NEVER happen in our school."

At these programs parents can receive a book and resource list as well as the students' questions. This is an opportunity to let parents review the curriculum and learn when and what is covered in religion, science and health classes. Many parents are surprised at what is covered and, equally important, not covered in these classes. This also allows parents to determine if the curriculum supports their values and beliefs and decide if their child is ready for the content.

Parents are supported when they learn they are not the only "mean" parents who will not allow their child to dress a certain way or see a certain movie. They can learn from each other as parents share how they handle different situations. Although parents give good evaluations to the guest speaker, they often share their wish that there was more time to talk with other parents. Programs benefit from small group discussions followed by a break time when parents can continue to talk with each other.