

Sex education - talking to young people

Research shows that young people want to talk with their parents and carers about sexual health. Many parents, however, don't know where to start or might feel uncomfortable having these conversations, but avoiding the subject won't stop their children from having sex.

By being honest and open, your child is more likely to turn to you for accurate information and answers to their questions, reducing their risk of unhealthy relationships, unwanted sex, unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

The media constantly exposes young people to images and stories about sex. They might also talk to their friends or look online for answers to their questions, but the information they take away won't always be accurate or positive.

Most young people (88 per cent) look for information about sexual health at some stage, with most turning to their mother or a female friend, using their school sexual health program and pamphlets, or talking to their doctor.

Research shows that talking to young people about sex doesn't encourage them to experiment sexually. It also shows that young people who receive comprehensive sexuality education have a lower risk of unplanned pregnancy and are more likely to delay their first sexual experience.

In Victoria, sexuality education is part of the school curriculum, and parents and carers can find out more information by contacting their child's school.

How and when to start sex education

It's okay to feel awkward or unsure when you're talking with your child about sex. Most adults feel this way when they start having these conversations, but you will become more confident with time and practice.

The easiest way is to start from a young age by using the correct names for body parts, but it's never too late. It's important to answer your child's questions honestly and directly when they come up, but you don't have to have all the answers. If you can't answer a question, suggest that you find out the information together.

Preparing yourself

The first step in talking to your child about sexuality is to prepare yourself. You are not alone if you feel unsure, as many adults haven't had comprehensive sexuality education.

Ways to prepare yourself for talking with your child about sex include:

- Talking about the topic with your partner or other adults
- Deciding what values and messages you want to communicate
- Reading about current sexual issues
- Organising a parent information session for you and your friends through Family Planning Victoria
- Accepting that your child could have different views to your own
- Remembering that the aim is to talk openly and honestly about the topic
- Finding age-appropriate books to read with your child.

A positive approach to sexuality

The best sexuality education is 'sex positive'. This involves:

- Acknowledging that young people choosing to be, or not to be, sexually active is a normal and healthy part of adolescence
- Recognising that adolescence is a time of sexual development and experimentation
- Supporting the right of young people to develop healthy, respectful and consensual sexual relationships
- Talking about sexual preferences in a positive way.

Try to use everyday moments as opportunities to start talking about sex. TV shows, news stories and radio topics can all be great starting points. Try asking your child, 'What do you think about that?' or 'Do you agree with what they said?'

What to talk about

Sexuality education is a lot more than the biology of reproduction. It also involves:

- How to have a good, respectful relationship
- Sexual feelings
- Sexual pleasure
- Personal values and beliefs about sexual relationships
- Gender roles
- STIs
- How to have safer sex
- Contraception, including emergency contraception ('the morning after pill')
- Ways to be intimate without having intercourse
- Sexual problems
- Sexual preferences
- How to say 'no' to unwanted sex and what to do if it happens
- What to do if they get pregnant.

Contraception

It's important to talk with your child about contraception and how to practice safer sex. The reasons some young people don't use contraception include:

- Lacking knowledge
- Worrying that their parents could find out
- Thinking that using contraception means they're promiscuous
- Thinking that planning for sex isn't spontaneous
- Being under the influence of alcohol and other drugs.

Gender roles

Gender roles are a key part of sexual relationships. Young people learn about adult relationships by watching how their parents and carers interact, which can then influence their own sexual relationships.

Young people need to learn that in a relationship, contraception is the responsibility of both partners. Both young men and women should be given accurate information about contraception, STIs and unplanned pregnancy to help them make informed decisions.

Making decisions

Young people need to learn how to negotiate sexual experiences positively and responsibly. Ways to help your child make safe and informed sexual decisions include:

- Giving them correct and clear information about contraception, safer sex and STIs
- Encouraging them to talk about sex and its consequences with their partner
- Coming up with ways to deal with unwanted sexual pressure, including peer pressure
- Encouraging them to find answers to their questions about sex by pointing them in the direction of reliable sources of information

- Making sure they understand how important it is to practice safer sex (such as using condoms)
- Always keeping the lines of communication open.

Ground rules at home

Most young people experiment sexually at some stage and not allowing them to have sex at home won't stop them from having sexual experiences. You will need to decide on the ground rules about sexual behaviour in your home, which could include whether or not your child is allowed to have their partner in their bedroom or stay the night. The best time to decide on these rules is when you're talking openly about sex.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100 or Family Planning Victoria's Youth Action Centre (for people aged under 25) Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9660 4700
- Parentline Tel. 1300 30 1300

Things to remember

- It's okay to feel awkward or unsure when you're talking with your child about sex.
- Young people need accurate information about sex to negotiate sexual relationships safely and responsibly.
- Sexuality education should cover a broad range of topics, including the biology of reproduction, relationships, making decisions, sexual preferences, contraception and STIs.
- The most influential role models for young people are their parents and carers.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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