

Sex education - tips for parents

Many parents find it difficult to talk to their children about sex. Simple tips and a range of practical suggestions are available which may help open the lines of communication.

How parents communicate

Research suggests that parents generally aren't very confident about discussing sexual issues with their children. Along the way, a lot of young people miss out on valuable information. Common findings from the research include:

- Fathers tend to avoid taking part in sex education discussions.
- When fathers do talk to their children about sex, they limit the conversation to less intimate issues.
- Mothers are more likely to talk about intimate, emotional and psychological aspects of sex than fathers.
- Mothers talk more about sex to their daughters than their sons.
- Parents tend to leave boys in the dark about female sexual issues such as menstruation.
- Parents may assume the school system will take care of their child's sex education, and so choose to say nothing.
- Parents may postpone talks about sex until they see evidence of the child having a relationship; for example, if their child starts dating or comes home with a love bite on their neck. These talks can turn into arguments because it can become a discipline issue rather than an opportunity to provide advice and guidance.
- Parents tend to show embarrassed or awkward body language when talking to their child about sex: for example, avoiding eye contact.
- Parents confine their talks to the mechanics and biology of sex, and tend to omit the more difficult or embarrassing topics such as masturbation, homosexuality and orgasms.

How children react

Younger children may be curious and interested when parents talk about sexual issues. Older children, particularly teenagers, tend to be a less willing audience. Research findings include:

- An older child may feel like they know it all and that their parents couldn't possibly teach them anything.
- An older child can be dismissive when their parents discuss sex with them, which shakes parental confidence.
- The child can feel as embarrassed and awkward as their parents, and may prefer not to talk about sex with them at all.
- If parents don't ever broach the subject of sex, the child tends to assume the parents don't want to talk about it - so the child never bothers to ask.

Successful communication

Families that talk openly about sexual issues share certain traits, which include:

- The parents are good listeners.
- The parents provide truthful answers to the child's questions.
- The child is allowed to have opinions about sexual issues and voice them without fear of getting yelled at or punished.
- The parents don't insist that the child stick to strict and inflexible standards of behaviour.
- The child feels listened to, understood and supported by their parents.

Preparing yourself

Suggestions include:

- **Learn as much as you can** - issues your older child or teenager is keen to hear you talk about include puberty, menstruation, reproduction, sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, unplanned pregnancy, abortion, homosexuality and premarital sex. The more you know, the less you'll stumble.
- **Have back-up information** - get age-appropriate books, articles and videos to help you.
- **Practice** - try out what you plan to say (and how) on your partner and friends. Try the words out so you feel comfortable with them.
- **Make it a regular topic** - think of sex education as an ongoing process. Smaller, frequent conversations are better than a big, one-off talk.
- **Plan ahead** - don't wait for your child to bring the subject up; they may figure you're unapproachable and not ask you. Plan to start the conversations about sex yourself.
- **Aim for a friendly chat** - try to see the talks as two-way discussions, not lectures. Plan to ask what your child thinks and feels. Aim to get a lively discussion going.

Getting started

Suggestions include:

- **Keep it casual** - don't make talking about sex a special, solemn occasion. Most parents and children find it easier to discuss sex if they're occupied doing everyday tasks such as cooking, washing the car or walking the dog.
- **Try to maintain eye contact** - avoiding eye contact can suggest embarrassment or discomfort. If your child gets this message from you, they will learn that talking about sexual issues is taboo. Of course, you won't have to worry about this so much if you're both busy washing the dishes, for example.
- **Use the cues around you** - conversation starters could include romantic scenes in movies on television or something that has happened to a person you know. You could begin by asking open-ended questions, such as 'What would you do if you found yourself in that situation?'. A general conversation based around a hypothetical situation is an easy starting point, and gives both you and your child a chance to express your thoughts and beliefs.
- **Use your own experience** - if you feel comfortable, illustrate particular points with stories from your own experience.
- **Explain your values** - older children and teenagers are interested in hearing about parental values and beliefs. Share them, but don't expect your child to feel the same way.

Avoiding the conversation stoppers

Certain reactions are likely to stop the conversation or turn it into an argument. Things to avoid include:

- Don't demand that your child share your beliefs and values.
- Don't argue that their opinions are wrong.
- Don't criticise, react in horror or get angry.
- Don't interrupt them when they're talking.
- Don't stop listening to them.
- Don't assume they want your guidance. If you feel like giving them advice, first tell them why.
- Don't be stern and unapproachable; for example, avoid threatening statements like 'If you get yourself pregnant, don't bother coming home'.
- Don't assume your child is sexually active or 'in trouble' if they ask you a question about sex. A hysterical response will probably guarantee your child may never risk asking you anything about sex again.

Avoiding awkward moments

Embarrassment can stop the conversation. Suggestions include:

- If you feel shy or embarrassed, say so and laugh about it. Perhaps you could have a chat about why sexual issues are so difficult to discuss. This can help ease the tension.
- If you are uncomfortable with talking about your own sexual experiences, say so honestly. Explain that people need their privacy.
- If you can't bring yourself to talk about something, tell your child that you'll find other ways to get the information to them. For example, you could get books, articles or videos on the subject.
- If you don't know the answer to something, say so. Ideally, you and your child could research the answer together.

When communication is too difficult

Sometimes, talking about sex seems impossible. The parent may be too embarrassed or the child may refuse to listen. Suggestions include:

- Keep at it, from time to time. Try different approaches.
- Talking over the phone may be easier.
- Find out what sort of sex education topics are covered in school classes. Your child may be more inclined to talk to you about sex if you bring up topics that haven't been already covered.
- Get age-appropriate sex education materials, such as books and videos, and leave them in your child's bedroom.
- Perhaps your child is interested in talking about sex, but not with you. Consider asking a trusted relative or friend to talk to your child instead.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your child's school
- Bookshops and libraries
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100

Things to remember

- Issues your older child or teenager is keen to hear you talk about include puberty, menstruation, reproduction, sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, unplanned pregnancy, abortion, homosexuality and premarital sex.
- Sex education is an ongoing process - short and frequent conversations are better than the big, one-off talk.
- Parents and children find it easier to discuss sex if they're preoccupied with another task, such as washing the car or walking the dog.

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

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