
Talking to young people about sex

Summary

- It is normal to feel awkward or unsure when 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.
-

Research shows that young people want to talk with their parents about sexual health. Many parents are unsure of where to start or may feel uncomfortable about having these conversations, but avoiding the subject will not stop their children from having sex or keep them safe.

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 being in an unhealthy relationship, experiencing unwanted sex or an unplanned pregnancy, or getting a sexually transmissible infection (STI).

Young people are exposed to images and stories about sex through the media and online that can be confusing and confronting. They may also talk with their friends or look online for answers to their questions, but the information they take away will not always be accurate, positive or age appropriate.

Most young people look for information about sexual health at some stage, with most turning to their mother (36 per cent) or a female friend (41 per cent), using their school sexual health program (43 per cent) or the internet (44 per cent), or talking to their doctor (29 per cent) or teacher (28 per cent).

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

Sex education in schools

In Victoria, sexuality education is a compulsory part of the school curriculum and parents are encouraged to contact their child's school if they want more information about the school's program. Parents may want to know about the specific content and messages that are delivered. They may, for example, ask whether or not the program is pro-choice or if it delivers sex-positive messages.

Research shows that school-based sexuality education improves sexual health outcomes for young people. Sexuality education is a way of providing children and young people with the skills and knowledge to manage their sexual wellbeing. It can also provide them with the fundamental tools they need to have healthy, responsible and satisfying sexual lives.

How and when to start sex education

It is normal to feel awkward or unsure when 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 practise.

The easiest way is to start from a young age by using the correct names for body parts. It is important to answer your child's questions honestly and directly when they come up. You are not expected to have all the answers. If you cannot answer a question, you can suggest finding the information together. Remember to keep the answer age appropriate and short, as your child can ask more questions if they need to.

Preparing yourself for talking about sex

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 have not had comprehensive sexuality education.

Ways to prepare yourself for talking with your child about sex may 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 developmentally 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 orientation and gender in a positive way
- remembering not to assume all young people are opposite sex attracted.

Try to use everyday moments as opportunities to start talking about sex. Television 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?'

How to talk about sex

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 sexual intercourse
- sexual problems
- sexual orientation
- how to say 'no' to unwanted sex and what to do if it happens
- what to do if you get pregnant.

Contraception

It is important to talk with your child about contraception and how to practice safer sex. The reasons some young people do not use contraception include:

- lacking knowledge
- feeling unsure about how to access clinical services
- worrying that their parents could find out
- thinking that using contraception means they are promiscuous
- thinking that planning for sex takes away the spontaneity

- 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 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. Young men and women should be given accurate information about contraception, STIs and unplanned pregnancy to help them make informed decisions.

Making decisions about sex

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 directing them to reliable sources of information
- making sure they understand how important it is to practise safer sex (such as using condoms)
- always keeping the lines of communication open.

Ground rules at home

Most young people will become sexually active at some stage. Not allowing them to have sex at home will not stop them from having sex. 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 to stay the night. The best time to decide on these rules is when you are talking openly about sex and before the situation arises.

Where to get help

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

Things to remember

- It is normal to feel awkward or unsure when 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 and gender diversity, contraception and STIs.
- The most influential role models for young people are their parents.

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

Family Planning Victoria

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2019 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.