Talking to children and young people about relationships, sex and sexuality

Summary

- It's normal to feel awkward or unsure when talking to children and young people about sex.
- Start early and keep talking, in a casual way, as opportunities arise.
- Young people need accurate information about sex to negotiate sexual relationships safely and responsibly as they become adults.
- The most influential role models for young people are their parents/carers.
- Relationships, sex and sexuality education should cover a broad range of topics.

About talking to children and young people about relationships, sex and sexuality

Research shows that young people want to talk with their parents/carers about relationships, sex and sexuality. Many parents/carers are unsure of where to start or may feel uncomfortable about having these conversations.

If young people are given accurate information about bodies, relationships sex and sexuality, they are given the tools to make safer choices as they become adults. Being able to talk about these things gives parents/carers an opportunity to discuss their own values surrounding relationships, sex and sexuality.

How and when to start

Start early and keep talking.

Parents/carers start teaching about relationships, sex and sexuality from birth. Very young children get messages from adults about their bodies, including learning words to describe their body parts and functions, and important concepts about public and private body parts and behaviours. It's recommended to teach accurate names for private body parts. This helps keep young people safe because they can more effectively ask questions about their bodies and report to a trusted adult if something isn’t right.

As your child gets older, continue these conversations as opportunities arise, and before they become critical. For example, start talking about puberty before changes start happening for your child. Start talking about healthy, respectful relationships before your child is likely to be exposed to pornography. Discuss safer sex practices before your child is likely to become sexually active. If you haven’t begun these conversations as early as you might have liked, don’t panic – find an opportunity.

Be the one they ask

If children know that they’ll get an accurate answer to their questions about relationships, sex and sexuality, they are more likely to ask at home. Be an approachable adult.

Keep it casual

Talking about relationships, sex, and sexuality doesn’t have to be a formal sit-down occasion. This can be integrated into any other conversation, so it becomes a normal part of life. Young people often want short, direct answers to their questions.

Use cues around you

To begin or continue conversations about relationships, sex and sexuality, use opportunities from news, current affairs, social media, advertising, song lyrics, books, television and movies. You can also use observations of people, relationships and the natural world.
Find books and resources

Using picture books for young children to explain complicated ideas like conception and pregnancy is a great start. For older children, they may need help finding suitable, accurate resources. If a child searches the internet for information about relationships, sex and sexuality, they are likely to find pornography. Better to be an approachable adult and look for suitable information together.

What to talk about

It’s usual for young people to be interested in adult things like sex. Answer questions honestly and with as much information as is suitable for the child’s age. If your child is asking a question, they are probably ready for the answer.

By the end of primary school, young people should have a good understanding around how our bodies work and change as we grow, also how babies are made. In secondary school the conversation moves more towards relationships, including intimate relationships. It’s all right to not answer questions about personal experiences.

Teenagers need to know that they can visit a doctor for confidential support with anything relating to their sexual and reproductive health. Once a young person turns 15 they can apply for their own Medicare card.

The following list of topics, in suggested age ranges, can be discussed as young people grow. Topics should be revisited throughout childhood and adolescence.

**Children aged 0 – 5:**
- Private and public body parts and behaviours
- Accurate names for private body parts
- Body autonomy
- Gender
- Getting help

**Early/Middle Primary School:**
- How babies are made
- How babies are born
- Diverse families

**Middle/Upper Primary School:**
- Puberty
- Identity
- Masturbation
- Sexual feelings
- Sexual orientation
- Reproduction
- Pornography

**Secondary School:**
- Contraception
- Relationships
- Respect
- Communication
- Age of consent laws
- Progressive, enthusiastic consent in sexual relationships
- Sexting and online safety
A positive approach to relationships, sex and sexuality

Most young people will have an interest in being sexually active at some stage as they move into adulthood. Providing accurate, honest, comprehensive information about relationships, sex and sexuality will help your child make healthy, safe, positive choices about what they want in their relationships.

Relationships and sexuality education in schools

In Victoria, Relationships and Sexuality Education is a compulsory part of the school curriculum. It’s part of the Health and Physical Education curriculum from Year 3 to Year 10. Relationships and Sexuality Education also is applicable to the Cross-curriculum Capabilities (Critical and Creative Thinking, Ethical, Intercultural, Personal and Social).

The Child Safe Standards are a requirement of schools, which mandate that organisations working with children provide ‘strategies to promote the participation and empowerment of children. This includes sexuality education’.

Parents/carers are encouraged to contact their child’s school if they want more information about their school’s program. It’s often helpful for parents/carers to know about the specific content, messages and delivery, so that they can continue discussions with their child at home.

Where to get help

- **Doing ‘IT’** – a podcast from the Family Planning Victoria Schools Education team for parents/carers and teachers of school-aged children to help navigate the world of relationships and sexuality education. Discussion topics include bodies, being safe, puberty, sex, sexual health and relationships
- **Talk Soon, Talk Often: a guide for parents talking to their kids about sex** – health information from the Department of Health Western Australian that may help parents initiate regular and relaxed conversations with their children about relationships and sexuality education
- **Family Planning Victoria** – parent and carer information sessions around talking to young people about bodies, sex and relationships
- Your child’s school
- **Your GP (doctor)**
- **Parentline** Tel. 1300 30 1300