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**

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
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.

References

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Sexual health basics

- Contraception - condoms for men
  Condoms are the most effective way to reduce your risk of contracting a sexually transmissible infection (STI) during sex.

- Contraception - condoms for women
  The female condom is effective in preventing an unplanned pregnancy and protecting against sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

- Contraception - choices
  The method of contraception you choose will depend on your general health, lifestyle and relationships.

- Contraception - emergency contraception
  It is best to take emergency contraception as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, but it still works well within 96 hours (four days).

- Masturbation
  Masturbation is a normal and healthy way for people to explore their own bodies.

- Safe sex
  Safe sex is sexual contact that doesn't involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners.

- Sex – are you ready
  It is normal to have mixed feelings about having sex with someone else.

- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
  It is not difficult to avoid catching sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

- Women's sexual and reproductive health (video)
  Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraceptions, menstruation, parental consent and conditions (such as PCOS and endometriosis).

Sexual relationships

- Partying safely and sex
  Partying is fun but being out of it on alcohol or drugs can put you at risk of unwanted or unsafe sex.
Safe sex

Safe sex is sexual contact that doesn't involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners.

Sex – are you ready

It is normal to have mixed feelings about having sex with someone else.

Time to immunise - free vaccines for men who have sex with men

Immunisation is one of the best ways you can protect yourself and others from infectious diseases in our community. In partnership with Thorne Harbour Health (formerly Victorian AIDS Council), the...

Women's sexual and reproductive health (video)

Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions (such as PCOS and endometriosis)...
Talking to primary school children about sex

Some parents find it hard to talk with their primary age children about sex, but help is available.

Talking to young people about sex

Talking about sex with your child is easier if you start when your child is young.

Talking to young people with cognitive disabilities about sex

Young people with cognitive disabilities have the same range of sexual feelings and desires as young people without disabilities.

Women's sexual and reproductive health (video)

Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions (such as PCOS and endometriosis).

Sexual assault and abuse

Date rape

Date rape can be especially common among young people who have had little sexual experience and aren’t sure that what they have experienced crosses the line into rape. Many victims of date rape can...

People with a disability who experience violence, abuse or neglect

People with a disability who experience violence, abuse or neglect can seek help from a range of services specifically designed to help them.

Recognising when a child is at risk

Too many children are physically, sexually and emotionally abused and when this happens, it is up to adults to speak up.

Sexual abuse

If you suspect sexual abuse or have been told about it by a child, you must report it.

Sexual abuse - helping your child

As a parent, you have an important role in helping your child recover from sexual abuse.

Sexual assault

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual behaviour or activity that makes the victim feel uncomfortable, frightened or threatened.

Contraception and abortion

Abortion

All women should have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decisions.

Abortion procedures - medication

Mifepristone, also called RU486 or the 'abortion pill', is used to terminate (end) a pregnancy up to nine weeks.

Abortion procedures - surgical

Abortion is one of the most common and safest types of surgery in Australia.

Contraception after an abortion

Whether you have a surgical or medical abortion you can become fertile again very soon after the abortion, so it's important to start using contraception immediately if you wish to prevent any...

Contraception after giving birth

After having a baby, you need to choose an effective method of contraception if you don't want to have another baby straight away.

Contraception - choices

The method of contraception you choose will depend on your general health, lifestyle and relationships.

Contraception - condoms for men

Condoms are the most effective way to reduce your risk of contracting a sexually transmissible infection (STI) during sex.

Contraception - condoms for women

The female condom is effective in preventing an unplanned pregnancy and protecting against sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

Contraception - diaphragms
The diaphragm acts as a barrier method of contraception.

- Contraception - emergency contraception
  It is best to take emergency contraception as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, but it still works well within 96 hours (four days).

- Contraception - implants and injections
  Hormonal contraception for women is available as implants or injections that slowly release hormones into the body over time.

- Contraception - injections for men
  Contraceptive injections for men are not yet available in Australia, but clinical studies suggest that they may provide a safe, effective and reversible method of male contraception in the future.

- Contraception - intrauterine devices (IUD)
  An intrauterine device (IUD) is a small contraceptive device that is put into the uterus (womb) to prevent pregnancy.

- Contraception - Louna’s lowdown on emergency contraception (video)
  This video was made by the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, Australia, with Louna Maroun to inform teenagers about this safe, effective form of contraception to prevent an unplanned pregnancy.

- Contraception - the combined pill
  The two types of oral contraception available in Australia are the combined pill, known as the Pill, and the mini pill.

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- Contraception - tubal ligation
  Sterilisation is a permanent method of contraception that a woman can choose if she is sure that she does not want children in the future.

- Contraception - vaginal ring
  The vaginal ring works in a similar way to the oral contraceptive pill to prevent pregnancy.

- Contraception - vasectomy
  Having a vasectomy does not affect a man’s ability to produce male sex hormones, enjoy sex or reach orgasm.

- Pregnancy - unplanned
  When a woman does not want to become a parent, her pregnancy options may include abortion or adoption.

Sexual issues throughout life

- Cognitive disability and sexuality
  People with intellectual disability can express their sexuality in satisfying ways.

- Menopause and sexual issues
  Menopause, the final menstrual period, is a natural event that marks the end of a woman’s reproductive years.

- Physical disability and sexuality
  Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support.

- Puberty
  Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people.

- Sex and chronic illness
  Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support.

Health conditions and sexual issues

- Brain injury and sexual issues
  A brain injury can change the way a person experiences and expresses their sexuality.

- Cognitive disability and sexuality
People with intellectual disability can express their sexuality in satisfying ways.

- **Diabetes and erectile dysfunction**
  
  Men with diabetes are more prone to problems with erectile dysfunction or impotence.

- **HIV and men - safer sex**
  
  HIV transmission can occur from men to women and from women to men as well as between men who have sex with men.

- **HIV and women - having children**
  
  Women living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), or women whose partner is HIV-positive, may wish to have children but feel concerned about the risk of transmission of the virus to themselves. HIV transmission can occur from men to women and from women to men as well as between men who have sex with men.

- **HIV and women - safer sex**
  
  Practising safe sex is important, whether your partner is HIV-positive or not.

- **Parkinson's disease and sexual issues**
  
  Communication is the best remedy for all types of relationship problems, including sexual problems caused by Parkinson's disease.

- **Physical disability and sexuality**
  
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Your gender is whether you think of yourself as male, female, both or even neither. And it may be the same as your physical sex, or it may be different.

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