

Talking With Your Young Child About Sex

Some parents may not be comfortable talking with their children about sex and sexuality. However, if children aren't getting the facts about sex and sexuality from their parents, they could be getting incorrect information from their friends or the media. Media rarely show responsible sexual behavior or offer correct information about abstinence, sexual intercourse, birth control, or the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help parents talk with their children about sex and sexuality.

Parents Are the Best Teachers

Talking about sex and sexuality gives you a chance to share your values and beliefs with your children. Your children need to know there is always a reliable, honest source they can turn to for answers—you. You can teach your children about relationships, love, commitment, and respect. When your children feel loved and respected by you, they are more likely to turn to you for answers and advice.

Teachable Moments

You can find teachable moments in everyday events. For example, talk about body parts and what's "private" during bath time. A pregnancy or birth in the family is a good time to discuss how babies are conceived and born. Watching TV with your children may also be a good time to discuss an on-screen relationship.

Use these teachable moments when they happen. Start by asking what your children already know. Let them guide the talk and ask questions. Let them know you're comfortable answering, so they feel comfortable asking.

General Talking Tips

When your children begin to ask questions, keep the following tips in mind:

- Talk openly, and let your children know they can ask you about anything.
- Try not to laugh, even if the question is cute. Your children might feel ashamed if you laugh.
- Try not to appear overly embarrassed or serious about the matter.
- Answer in simple, age-appropriate terms. Answer the question, but don't go on to add unnecessary details.
- Use proper names for all body parts.
- See if your children want or need to know more. Follow up your answers by asking, "Does that answer your question?"
- Listen to your children's responses and reactions.
- Be prepared to repeat yourself.

If you are uneasy talking about sex or answering certain questions, be honest about that too. You may want to ask a relative, a close family friend, or your children's doctor to help explain things.

Talking With Preschool and School-aged Children

The questions your children ask and your answers will depend on each child's age and ability to understand. Here are common questions and issues for different age groups.

Preschool children

“How did I get in your tummy?”

“Where was I before I got in your tummy?”

“How did I get out?”

“Where do babies come from?”

“How come girls don’t have a penis?”

18 months to 3 years of age—Children in this age group begin to learn about their own body. It is important to teach your children the proper names for body parts. Making up names for body parts may give the idea that there is something bad about the proper name. Also, teach your children which parts are private (parts covered by a bathing suit).

4 to 5 years of age—Children in this age group may begin to show an interest in basic sexuality. It’s normal for children to touch their own genitals (private parts) or to be curious about what other people’s genitals look like. Children may also engage in sexual play, like pulling their pants down or pulling other children’s pants down to reveal their genitals. However, children need to learn that

- It’s not appropriate to show their genitals in public.
- It’s not appropriate to touch anyone else’s genitals.
- No other person, including even close friends and relatives, may touch their genitals. The exceptions are doctors and nurses during physical exams with the parent’s permission and parents when they are trying to find the cause of any pain in the genital area.

By the time children are school aged, they should know the following:

- Proper names and functions of body parts (including the womb or uterus where a baby grows—not “mom’s tummy”)
- Physical differences between people with male and female body parts

School-aged children

“Who can have a baby?”

“Why do some people get erections?”

“What is a period?”

“How do people have sexual intercourse?”

“Why do some kids have 2 mommies or 2 daddies?”

5 to 7 years of age—Children in this age group may become interested in what takes place sexually between adults. Their questions will become more complex as they try to understand the connection between sexuality and making babies. They may come up with their own explanations about how the body works or where babies come from. They may also turn to their friends for answers. Lessons and values they learn about healthy sexual relations at this age will stay with them as adults.

8 to 9 years of age—Children in this age group may become interested in learning more about relationships. For example, they may become interested in how their parents met and fell in love. As questions about romance, love, and marriage arise, they may ask questions about different types of relationships, including homosexual relationships. Use this time to discuss your family’s thoughts about relationships. At this age, children will be going through many changes that will prepare them for puberty. Teaching your children to be sexually responsible is one of the most important lessons.

As children approach puberty, they should know about

- The body parts related to sex and their functions
- How babies are conceived and born
- Puberty and how the body will change
- Menstruation (All children can benefit from this information.)
- Sexual intercourse
- Birth control
- STIs, how they are spread, and how to protect themselves
- Masturbation
- Homosexuality
- Family and personal guidelines
- Gender identity

About Masturbation

Up to the age of 5 or 6 years, masturbation is quite common. Around age 6, children become more socially aware and may feel embarrassed about touching themselves in public. Make sure your children understand that masturbation is a private activity, not a public one. Masturbation in private may continue and is normal.

There are times when frequent masturbation can point to a problem. It could be a sign that a child is under a lot of stress. In rare cases, it could even be a sign of sexual abuse. If masturbation becomes a problem, talk with your children's doctor.

Visit [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org) for more information.

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