

Beyond the Birds and the Bees

Studies show that children who feel they can talk to parents about sex are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviour as teenagers than are children who feel they cannot approach parents. So what makes you approachable and how do you begin?

A good place to start is to reflect on your own values about sex, and how they came to be. Sexual values are thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and prejudices about sex, sexuality and gender. Identifying your sexual values helps prevent you from acting in ways that contradict how you feel. Becoming aware of prejudices or old beliefs can stop you from passing them along to the next generation.

Talking with children about sex is an ongoing process – a gentle flow of information that changes as children grow and mature. Being open conveys the message that no subject is forbidden and will strengthen the trust between you and your child. Begin by using the correct names for all parts of the body from a very young age. For example, use the words penis, vulva or breasts just as you use the words eyes, ears and nose. Children should be proud of their bodies and comfortable talking about body parts. Knowing correct names is also for safety as children can communicate if someone has touched them inappropriately. Children should also be taught that the parts that should not be touched by others are those covered by their bathing suit.

It is perfectly normal for young children to explore each other's bodies by role-playing and undressing. Acknowledge their curiosity and use the opportunity to share information. The games will eventually pass as other interests take over. Keep in mind that children as young as a few months old touch their genitals as they explore their body parts. As they grow they learn that self-stimulation is pleasurable or soothing. If you notice your child masturbating, let them know you understand that it feels good to touch themselves, and that it is something for them to do in private. Avoid shaming them, as they may believe there is something bad about their sexual parts. Masturbation can only cause emotional harm if adults overreact to it. Parents should only be concerned if they have reason to believe that masturbation is being taught by someone else, if the child tries to masturbate others, or if they continue to do so in front of others.

By preschool, a child's curiosity is growing and they may become interested in the mechanics of sex and where babies come from. Using the words "seed" and "tummy" to discuss sex can be confusing for children as they have literal associations for these words. Instead, explain that a woman's egg and a man's sperm join together and grow into a baby in the woman's body. By age nine or ten children should understand the mechanics of sex and reproduction. Move beyond teaching about biological facts to discuss caring, concern and responsibility. Clarify media messages that sex is isolated from a committed relationship and teach that every action has consequences. By discussing emotional aspects of a sexual relationship your child will likely make informed decisions and resist peer pressure.

At all times try to respect your child's comfort level with physical contact. Do not force your child to hug or kiss visitors goodbye. This sends the implicit message that a child must be submissive to adult requests for physical contact. Respecting your child's physical boundaries empowers them to rely on their intuition. Remember, it is never too late to begin talking with your child about sex.