

Talking to your kids about sex

What is Sexuality?

Sexuality is an important aspect of a person's life made up of many parts. It includes how we feel about ourselves, our values, relationships, the roles we play in society, and how we behave sexually. It is a changing process that starts at birth and continues throughout one's lifetime. It is the sum of our physical, emotional and spiritual processes, thoughts and feelings.

The many facets of sexuality include...

- **Body image:** How we feel about the way we think our body appears to others; how self-image of our own body and how we think it compares to standards set by society affects the way we think and feel about ourselves.
- **Gender roles:** The rules often imposed by society that teaches us how we are expected to express ourselves appropriately as male or female. To avoid being "locked" into roles, think about whether you think it is acceptable for boys or girls to be assertive. These are human emotions that should not be associated with any one gender. Children must be raised as equals.
- **Relationships:** The different ways we can express our care and intimacy with people (friends, lovers, family). Talk with children about the different types of relationships in their lives.
- **Intimacy/love/affection:** A special sharing of personal thoughts or feelings; does not always have to be expressed physically. There are many ways to express love and affection.
- **Self-esteem:** How you feel about your own self-worth; how much you value yourself. Encourage your child to have a high regard for his/her self-worth by praising him/her.
- **Eroticism:** What you enjoy and value emotionally and physically. What excites you, or what you enjoy doing sexually.
- **Genitals:** Defines physically anatomical sex. Genitals provide a source of pleasure, but pleasure is only one facet of sexuality.

What Do Children Need to Know?

The first, most important source of sexual learning for children comes from observing and learning from parents in the home. Whether parents realize it or not, learning about sexuality begins at birth. To help children grow into healthy adults capable of making responsible decisions about their sexuality, parents must provide clear and "open" parent/child communication. Begin to develop an open atmosphere by encouraging children to freely ask questions about sex at an early age. Otherwise, youngsters are likely to get inaccurate information from other unreliable sources

Consider the following:

- Many teens mistakenly believe that TV offers realistic sexual images and messages.
- Young people cite the media as one of their major sources of information about sex.
- Most young people get inaccurate information about sex from their peers.
- The results of getting the wrong messages about sexuality can be dangerous!
- Over 1 million teens get pregnant each year in this country; 4 out of 5 of these are unplanned.
- By the ages of 15-17, eight out of ten boys and seven out of 10 girls have already had sexual intercourse.
- By the ages of 15-17, one out of seven teenagers have had a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

Research supports that open, honest family communication and sharing values about sexuality greatly helps children to make responsible sexual decisions. In early childhood, open dialogue teaches young children how to say "no" to inappropriate adult sexual advances. Later, open talk helps teens cope with the peer pressure to engage in sexual behaviour they may not be ready for. Talking with children helps them when struggling with confused thoughts and feelings about sexuality and relationships. Children will know that you are "askable" and approachable, that you care and are concerned about them. This creates a strong communication bridge, preventing a barrier between parents and children when communicating in the future.

"But I don't want to encourage anything..."

Some parents fear that addressing sexuality issues encourages or promotes sexual activity. Not so. Surveys of young people clearly show that ideas about sex are already there. All the more reason for parents to begin talking, to provide information, and, most importantly, to share your own values.

When is the best time to start?

Children are exposed to sexual message from birth. The best time to start talking is as early as possible. But, if you haven't started yet, it's never too late. Start with open-ended questions to determine what the child already knows. It is impossible to "catch-up" in one conversation, but sexuality extends across a lifetime. This means you can maintain close ties with your children throughout adolescence.

What Children Should Know and When They Should Know It

By age 5, children should:

- Use correct terms for all sexual body parts, including the reproductive organs
- Understand their bodies belong to them and that they have a right to refuse unwanted touch
- Know where babies come from and how they "get in" and "get out"
- Know that "sex talk" is for private times at home

By age 9, children should:

- Be aware that all creatures reproduce themselves
- Understand basic facts about HIV and AIDS
- Begin to be aware of non-stereotyped gender roles, and to operate within them
- Have and use an acceptable vocabulary for communication about body parts, both their own and those of the opposite sex

By age 13, children should:

- Understand that sexuality is a natural part of life
- Understand how male and female bodies grow and differ, including the changes their bodies will undergo during puberty
- Know the biological components of the reproductive cycle, including the probability of pregnancy and/or STIs with unprotected intercourse

By age 18, adolescents should:

- Recognize the media's impact on encouraging sexual involvement
- Understand differences in sexual preferences and behaviours, including celibacy, marriage, heterosexuality, homosexuality, etc.
- Have a value system about interpersonal relations, including sexual decisions and behaviour
- Understand contraceptive alternatives, where to get them, and causes and cures of STIs

Sexuality Education Tips for Parents

<p>Talk with your partner to discuss and clarify your sexual values and sexuality education strategies. Rehearse sexual words and ways of responding to situations so that you will be prepared when you encounter your child's sexual curiosity.</p>	<p>Answer questions as they come up, one at a time. Children whose parents put off answering their questions with statements like "later" or "another time" may never ask again. Be approachable and askable.</p>
<p>Recognize feelings of discomfort or embarrassment you may have. A simple acknowledgement that "this is hard for me, but I want to talk to you about it anyway" may clear the air and lay the foundation for further discussion.</p>	<p>Keep answers short, simple, clear and in language that your child understands. Children stop listening when they are no longer interested.</p>
<p>Be a good listener. Look at your child. Pay attention. Find out how much your child already knows when they ask you questions about reproduction, birth, sexual language and other sexual topics. Ask, "What do you think" to discover his/her level of understanding and any misconceptions he/she might have.</p>	<p>Purchase or borrow good sexuality education resources. You will probably want to buy at least one children's book on bodies, one children's book on reproduction and birth, and one general guidebook for parents. If you give your child a book, read it together.</p>
<p>Remember that sexuality education is a life-long process, not something that will be accomplished in one conversation. Expect questions to resurface many times before the concept is learned.</p>	<p>Be an "askable" parent. Let your child know that she/he can talk to you about any subject, including sexuality. Keeping the lines of communication open helps you to convey valuable knowledge and important values to your child now as well as in the future.</p>
<p>If you don't know the answer to your child's question, don't be embarrassed to admit it. Seek out the information you need and get back to your child.</p>	<p>Be a positive role model for your child. When you demonstrate warmth, affection and support to your spouse/partner, you are showing your child how to behave in interpersonal relationships. Talk about love and affection, as well as providing children with facts about anatomy, safety issues and sexual functioning.</p>
<p>Don't assume that because your child doesn't ask questions about sexuality, she/he isn't curious. Parents who never speak about sexuality give an unspoken message that it isn't an appropriate topic for discussion. If your child hasn't asked questions by the age of 5, bring up the subject yourself. Take advantage of teachable moments, like a neighbour's pregnancy or a story on television about a sexual issue.</p>	

This fact sheet is reproduced with permission from Planned Parenthood of Nassau County.

Hempstead, Glen Cove & Massapequa. (516) 750-2600. www.ppnc.org

For more information please contact The Clinic at 519-663-5446.

References

¹Planned Parenthood of Nassau County. Hempstead, Glen Cove & Massapequa. (516) 750-2600 Retrieved from <http://www.ppnc.org>

Last modified on: December 27, 2012