

How to Talk to Your Kids About **SEX**



When it comes to talking to kids about sex, parents often worry about discussing too much too soon. But in reality, many share too little too late. Debra Evans gives practical handles in approaching the oft-shunned topic.

Kimberly [a twenty-one-year-old mother of eight-and-two-year-old children] learned about sex from her boyfriend. "When you're in middle school and you run into a boy who's 19 and cute, he can teach you about sex in a few minutes. You don't want him to be the one who teaches your kids about sex, but if you don't, he will."

B. Kantrowitz and P. Wingert
Newsweek, February 15, 1993



My parents were never very comfortable talking with my sisters and I about sex. Mom became unusually reserved whenever the subject came up, though she would talk openly about her own embarrassing dating encounters. For the most part, Dad was silent on the subject, apart from a few well-timed chuckles. Perhaps it was that awkwardness that prompted me to want to teach my children differently.

Determined to create an open atmosphere in our home where our kids felt free to talk with us about anything, my

husband and I resolved to stay calm regardless of what our children asked. For us, the question wasn't *whether* we would teach our kids about sexuality, but *when* and *how*. And it wasn't long before our kids began to ask tough questions: *Dad, is it true that a man puts his penis in a woman's vagina to make a baby – and did you do that to Mom? Yikes!*

I can clearly recall the day our 4-year-old daughter barged in on me in the bathroom and cried out, "Mommy! What's that?"; pointing to the sanitary pad in my hand. After a brief, what-do-I-say-now moment of panic, I took a cleansing breath, smiled and gave Joanna my best – albeit totally spontaneous – answer.

We all want our children to have a healthy, godly view of sex and sexuality. We want to be our children's primary source of information about sex. But many of us have no clue how to talk to our children about such a sensitive, and sometimes embarrassing subject. Here are some principles that will help.

Live What You Teach

Children learn about love and sex by watching their parents' interaction with each other. How you respond

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The first step in teaching kids about sexuality is enabling them to both give and



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receive love, according to Stanton Jones, Ph.D., a psychologist and provost at Wheaton College in Illinois.

"Which is more convincing?" he asks. "Distant, rigid, unemotional parents who force their children to memorise 'God is love' while rarely embracing them, or loving parents who share with their children the joys of God's love while holding them and embodying that love in a vivid way?"

You are your child's first experience with the physical side of love, whether it's the way you stroke a new baby, tickle your 2-year-old or hug your 6-year-old. Each touch and coo communicates affection and deep love. Even newborns recognise the voice and touch of the people who care for them. As children get older, physical contact translates to a feeling of security, which in turn translates to a sense of being loved.

Children also learn about love by watching their parents. When children see Mommy and Daddy hug, kiss and snuggle, they know that those gestures are expressions of love. As they get older, they'll recognise that physical affection is a natural way for married people to show their love. And by the time they begin making their own choices about sex, they'll have an internal sense of the joy of physical intimacy within marriage.

Be Approachable

It's normal to feel uncomfortable when talking about sex with your children. Yet Marianne Neifert, professor of paediatrics at the University of Colorado, says, "We owe it to our children to educate them to function sexually as adults." To overcome your discomfort, start by asking other Christian parents how they handle the subject. Ask your paediatrician or pastor to recommend resources. See if your church offers sex education seminars. Check Christian bookstores for books and videos to expand your own knowledge. If you're not comfortable with using the correct terminology, practice saying the words out loud until they sound more natural to you.

Through sensitivity and honesty in everyday situations, you can teach your kids that you're comfortable with their sexual design – and your own. If your preschooler starts

naming his body parts during bath time and, pointing to his genitals, asks, "What's this?" give a simple, confident

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reply: "Your penis and your scrotum." Such a matter-of-fact answer provides the information he seeks without implying there's something bad about his body.

Don't worry if you still feel uneasy. There may be times when an older child asks a question you don't know how to answer. It's OK to say, "I don't know the answer to that, but I can find out and we can talk about it then." When appropriate, use this as a time to learn with your child by visiting the library or reading a book together. "Being able to present sexuality to your child comfortably and accurately has the fringe benefit of enabling communication with him in the future," notes *Christian Parenting Today* adviser William Sears, a paediatrician and father of eight. "It conveys to your child that you're an open, accurate and willing source of information, and it sets the stage for a more meaningful dialogue by the time your child is a teenager."



Anticipate Questions

The easiest way to discuss sexuality is to begin early, answer questions freely and **offer age-appropriate**

information, says Neifert. An honest explanation, no matter how brief, is always better than none. Avoid putting off a response, although a specific delay – “Let’s talk about that when we get home” – is preferable to “We’ll talk about it when you’re older” or “It’s not nice to talk about such things.”

In order to answer explicit questions “on the spot,” parents should prepare and practice. It’s hard to know when a question about sex will come up. For instance, my friend Diane and her elementary-aged daughter were coming home from a visit with a pregnant relative when Diane’s daughter asked, “How did the baby get in Aunt Carol’s stomach?”

Although Diane was tempted to say, “God put the baby there,” she was prepared to supply a more complete answer: “Aunt Carol’s baby isn’t really growing in her stomach, but in a place near her stomach called the uterus. God made a husband’s and a wife’s bodies to fit together in a special way. It’s called sexual intercourse and it’s how God helps a man and a woman make a baby. The woman’s body makes an egg and the man’s body makes the seed, called sperm, that fertilizes the egg. When the woman becomes pregnant, the baby grows inside her.”

Perhaps as difficult as knowing what to say is knowing when to say it. If your 5-year-old asks the same question as Diane’s daughter, how much information is necessary? Most experts suggest

providing brief, basic answers and then pausing to determine if the child wants to ask anything more. Once a child’s curiosity is satisfied, he’ll usually go on to the next topic. As you respond according to your child’s developmental stage, you’ll find that he’ll let you know what he is and isn’t ready to hear.

To some degree, you can anticipate the kinds of questions your children will ask. If, for example, you or someone your children know is pregnant, expect your 4-year-old to have some questions. If your preteen has friends who are starting to hit puberty, you can bet she’ll soon be asking questions about her own development. If you think about the questions your kids are likely to ask before they ask them, you’ll have the opportunity to rehearse your replies.

Tune In to Teachable Moments

Don’t wait to pass on accurate knowledge about the beauty of sex in the context of marriage until after your child has been exposed to others’ views and values. You should be the first one to talk to him about sex. **Be on the lookout for opportunities.** A birth – whether it’s the birth of new puppies or a new baby borne within

the family – is an excellent time to talk about the value of life and God’s design for procreation.

If you have older children or preteens, you might be surprised at their lack of questions. One

way to get them talking is to discuss popular movies or the recent experiences of friends and relatives.

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If your child is older and sexuality has not been openly discussed in your home, it's not too late. Start afresh today. **Create an open atmosphere for communication in your home. That's your best insurance for protecting your teens against destructive moral messages related to sexuality.**

According to Jones, this process involves "deliberately exposing kids to the arguments and pressures they'll be exposed to later in life, but in the safe environment of the family, then showing how those non-Christian influences are unconvincing, false and destructive."

So if you talk to your daughter ahead of time about the same mistake many young women make by confusing sex with love, she'll be less likely to confuse the two when she begins to form her own dating relationships. If your son understands that girls are not objects of lust

but his sisters in Christ, he'll likely learn to treat his dates with care and respect.

Focus on Scripture

No matter when or how you talk to your children about sexual issues, you'll want to make one fact crystal clear: Our sexuality is a precious gift from God and must be treated with great care. "Keeping the good of creation separate from sin's distortions is no easy job," admits Lewis B. Smedes, Ph.D., in *Sex for Christians* (Eerdmans). "We are to love what God has made and hate what sinful men and devils have unmade. The job is to cultivate a clear perception for what is of God and what is of sin."

To help your children see sex as something God wants us to use wisely, spend time with your kids studying Scripture's approach to sexuality. **Spend time praying**



for and with your children, especially as they become more mature and face more temptations.

Talking about sexuality with our children is perhaps one of the most important conversations we'll have with them. In truth, it's a conversation that starts early and lasts for years. Our society is laced with misinformation about the nature of sex and our roles as sexual beings. But God's message is clear: Sexuality is part of his creation. And that means it is good.

What Your Child Needs to Know: An Age-by-Age Guide

STAGE	CHILD'S INTEREST	PARENTS' RESPONSE
<i>Infancy</i> (birth to 2)	Touch sensations; differentiating self from surroundings	<i>Affirm through nurturing touch – cuddle, hold, caress.</i>
<i>Toddlers</i> (2 to 3)	Sensations associated with genitals, bodily functions	<i>Allow child to touch his genitals; toilet train without shaming or embarrassing child.</i>
<i>Early childhood</i> (4 to 6)	Exploring and comparing, gender differences	<i>Acknowledge child's curiosity about sexuality; answer questions factually and positively; allow self-discovery; protect child's privacy. Expect exploratory play with peers; make positive statements about being a boy or girl; help child take pride in his or her gender; discuss nudity, modesty.</i>
<i>Late childhood</i> (7 to 9)	Privacy issues, increased awareness of social attitudes about gender and sexuality	<i>Help child establish physical boundaries; be prepared to answer more complex questions about sex.</i>
<i>Preadolescence</i> (10 to 12)	Changes associated with puberty, self-esteem messages	<i>Foster understanding of emotional and biological changes; discuss menstruation, masturbation, sexually transmitted diseases, physical boundaries with the opposite sex, the need for abstinence, the role of sex in marriage.</i>

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Recommended Read: *How & When to Tell Your Kids About Sex* by Stanton L. and Brenna B. Jones (NavPress)