

# TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT SEX



A guide for parents



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### **A note about parents**

In this booklet we use the word "parents" in a very broad way. We take parents to be adults who play a parenting role in their home. We think of parents, amongst others, as grandmothers and grandfathers, other relatives, foster parents, biological parents, and other guardians of children.

### **Acknowledgements**

This booklet was adapted from "How to Talk with Your Child About Sexuality: A Parents Guide" by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc., New York

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# Talking with your child about sex and sexuality

**S**ex. It's on the radio, in movies and is written about in magazines. Soaps on television, like "The Bold and the Beautiful", are so full of sexual relationships that it's hard to keep track of who has slept with whom. There are songs about sex that people go around singing. Advertisers use sex to sell anything from chocolates to cars. People talk about sex everywhere – in taxis, walking along the street, at home, parties and in school. So children hear and see a lot about sex. But they don't always get the right facts or positive ideas about it. This can cause confusion and create misunderstandings about what sex and sexuality are. Too often children have sex before they are ready. This can have life long results, like becoming a teenage mom or dad, or getting sexually transmitted diseases, such as herpes or AIDS, or being held back in study or career opportunities. We want our children to have healthy and fulfilling lives. Teaching them about sex is an important part in this. And it is a parent's responsibility.



WHERE DO BABIES  
COME FROM?



## What if I feel uncomfortable talking about sex?

**I**f you feel uncomfortable talking with your children about sex you are not alone. Many of us feel this way. This can be because:

- Our own parents did not speak openly with us about sex and sexuality, and so we're not sure how to do it.
- We feel uncomfortable talking with our children about sex:
- We worry that if we talk to our children about sex it will encourage them to have it.
- Many of us were taught that sex is dirty.
- Cultural and religious beliefs often stop parents talking to their children about sex and sexuality.
- Many of us are afraid that we don't have all the answers for our children.
- It's hard for some of us to accept and admit that our children are sexual.
  - It's also hard for us to admit to our children that we are sexual.

HOW DID I  
LEARN ABOUT  
SEX?



Try to remember how you got your information about sex. How did this affect your own attitudes towards sexual relationships? We live in a very different world to the one our parents lived in as children. The demands and pressures our children have to deal with are very tough, like the high violent crime rate and HIV/AIDS. It is our job to help our children make wise and informed decisions. Studies have shown that the more accurate facts children have about sex, the more likely they are to put off having it. This booklet offers ideas on how to talk with your child about sex and sexuality.

## What is the difference between sex and sexuality?

**T**here are two meanings to the word "sex". The one is whether you are born female or male. The other is the act of making love – having sex.

Sexuality has to do with how we see ourselves as girls and

boys, women and men. It includes how we think and feel about our body, whether we fall in love with people of the opposite or the same sex, the sexual feelings we get and the thoughts we have. Our sexuality influences decisions that we make and how we behave.



Sexuality also has to do with our values in life, love and in our friendships. It is how we experience love, happiness, joy and sadness.

### Sexual orientation

Our sexual orientation influences our sexuality. We talk about someone being "straight" if they are attracted to people of the opposite sex. "Gays" are men who are attracted to men. When women are attracted to women, they are "lesbians". People who are attracted to both women and men are "bisexual".

## Why do children need to know about sexuality?

**C**hildren who understand their sexuality are:

- More able to take control of their lives.
- Likely to be more confident and have loving relationships.
- More able to cope with their feelings.
- More able to say "no" when they don't agree with what their friends say or do.
- Better protected from being sexually abused, and from becoming abusers.





## Learning about sex starts at home

**F**rom the day they are born, children learn about sexuality. Home is the most meaningful place where they learn about it. You pass your ideas, attitudes and feelings about sex and sexuality – and everything else – onto your children. You may not think about how much they learn from you. But we are most certainly our children's role models.

As parents, we can help our children to feel good about their sexuality right from the beginning of their lives. This will make it easier for them to ask questions and make wise decisions about sex later on in life. We must offer correct information, in a way they can easily understand for their age. We can also challenge some of the misunderstandings and incorrect information they get elsewhere.

## "No" means "No"!

**W**e can help our children to be able to say "No" when they are asked to do something sexual that they do not feel comfortable with. It is especially boys, to respect a girl when she says "No". In South Africa we have a culture where men and boys believe that girls and women are their possessions to do with as they wish. This goes against democracy and is also against the law. Our Bill of Rights is part of our Constitution. It is a legal document that says what your rights are. It says you have the right, amongst many other things, to equality and freedom from



discrimination. It says you have the right to human dignity, to privacy and to a healthy environment. Yet our rape and women abuse rates are amongst the highest in the world.

## Build trust

**O**ur children will be more likely to trust us and talk with us if we are honest, open and caring. If we talk down to them, or speak to them in a disapproving way, they are likely to turn away from us.

If your child decides to begin having sexual relations, even though they know you don't think it wise, don't abandon them. Try to remember when you were a child and a teenager. What kinds of things did you do?

Our children will make their own decisions. Our job is to educate and guide them in the hope that they will make wise ones. If they do become sexually active, we can still play a part in protecting them. We can do this by telling them about the different methods of contraception, where to get them and how to protect themselves from sexually to get them and how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS before they start having sex. This means we ourselves have to be well informed with up-to-date information.

See this as a challenging journey you travel on together with your child or children.

## Can you give too much information?

**T**here is no such thing as too much information because:



- Information does not encourage children to become sexually active.
- Children make better decisions about sex when they have all the information they need, and when they can talk openly at home.
- If children have knowledge they will be better able to protect themselves against pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS when they do decide to have sex.

Giving children helpful information is as important as giving them food, shelter, clothing and love.

## How to go about talking about sex?

**E**ven if you feel uncomfortable talking about sex, you can still help your child become comfortable with her or his sexuality. Be open and honest about your feelings. This will make it easier for them to be open and honest with you in return.

This example may help you start a discussion about sex and sexuality. You say something like: "It is hard for me to talk about sex. My parents and I never discussed these things. But I want you to have someone to talk with when you need to."



If you hide your feelings or avoid the issue you won't get anywhere. Your child will know what you are doing. You don't always have to be serious when you talk about sex and sexuality. Nothing breaks the ice like a good laugh.

## When is the best time to start talking about sex?

**S**tart talking with your child about sex as soon as she or he begins getting sexual messages. This is from when they're born. Don't worry if you haven't started yet, it's never too late. The most important thing is to be there for your child when she or he wants to talk. Look for opportunities to discuss issues to do with sex and sexuality. You may be listening to the radio when a sex-related topic comes up. Ask your child what she or he thinks about what has been said on the programme. Share ideas and views with each other.

## What do children need to know? And when do they need to know it?


**C**hildren want to know that they're normal. We can help them understand that everyone is different. And that being different is normal. Children have different needs at different stages in their lives. Here are some ideas and guidelines to help your children through them:

### Birth to two years old

**W**e give babies a sense of being a person from the time they are born. How we treat them makes them feel safe and secure, or unsafe and insecure. We give them this kind of sense from:



- How we hold and touch them
- The way we feed them, wash them and change their nappy
- How we speak to them and the tone of our voices.
- Letting them feel comfortable with their bodies and emotions.

 They develop positive feelings about sexuality when we do all these things in a gentle, loving and caring way.

It is normal for babies to explore their bodies. Girls are quick to learn that touching their clitoris feels good. Boys discover the same with their penises. Let them enjoy this exploration. It is normal. If you shout at them or hit their hands, they'll do it anyway. Later they will do it secretly. You would have taught them to feel guilty about touching their genitals. Also, they may not trust you later in life when they're looking for guidance about sex. It's also important to let children know, from the time they are born, that bowel movements and weeing are normal, healthy body functions.

## Three to five year olds

**B**y the time your child is three she or he may already have asked you why girls and women look different to boys and men. She or he is ready to know that females and males have different sex organs, and may want to touch or ask you about them. Talk about genitals the same way you talk about elbows, noses, fingers and toes. Use the right names. Say clitoris, penis, breasts or vagina instead of nicknames like willie, cookie, and so on. If you use nicknames children may get the idea that something is wrong with these parts of their body.

Toddlers are also curious about their bodies and those of their



friends, brothers, sisters and cousins. They may play “doctor-nurse” or other games that give them the chance to look at each other’s bodies. This is a normal way for children to find out the differences and learn about their sexuality. You may even have learnt this way yourself.



You can choose to allow children to play these games or not. It won't help to punish your children for being normal. If you choose to let them play like this, keep your distance but make sure none of the children is frightened, or being hurt. Three year-olds start asking: “Where do babies come from?” You don't have to explain sex at this stage. Keep your answers simple. You might want to say something such as: “Babies grow in a special place inside their mommy.”

As the child grows older you can slowly add other details when he or she will be able to understand more.

It is normal for four year-olds to get very close to a parent. Some children may even get jealous of the other parent or partner, if there is one in your life. They can become very close to parents of both sexes. This does not mean your child is straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual. Let your children feel comfortable with whatever bonds they make, so long as you trust the adult.

Four year-olds may want to snuggle in bed with their parents. They may also want to see their parents without clothes on. It is important to only allow what all members of your family feel comfortable with. But children should not be punished for asking for such things.

## Five to seven year olds

**A**s they grow up, it is common for children to become less attached to their parents. Children who are between five and seven years old begin to notice what sex they are and how society thinks they should behave. They can become quite possessive about being female or male. This is why it is common for them to say that they hate children of the opposite sex. Children in primary school may be shy about asking questions. This doesn't mean they don't have the questions. Most of them have heard about such things as HIV/AIDS, rape and child abuse. They wonder about these things even if they don't say anything. So we need to keep opening discussions with them and responding to their questions.

Following up what a neighbour said, television and radio programmes, pictures, headlines in newspapers and magazines can all help us start a conversation with our children. These are "teachable moments".



Most children touch their sex organs for pleasure. This is called masturbation and it is very common for girls and boys in this group to do. Many of us were brought up to believe masturbation is "dirty" and "disgusting". But it is actually a healthy and normal thing for both children and adults – but only in private.

## Pre-teens: Eight to twelve years old

**C**hildren in this pre-teen group need to know all the facts about menstruation, wet dreams (when boys ejaculate semen while they are asleep), growing breasts and

growing breasts and other signs of growing up.

Pre-teens worry a lot about whether they are “normal”. Boys worry about their penis size. Girls worry about their breast size. We must tell our children that no two people are the same and that it is normal to be different. It is good to encourage them to feel unique and confident about who they are and how they look. Parents sometimes bring their children down both at home and in public by shouting at them or making them feel embarrassed. Parents don't realise how much damage they are doing to both their child as a growing person and to their relationship with their child.



We need to let pre-teens “fit in” with other children their age, their peers. At the same time we must also encourage them to think for themselves and not to be influenced by their peers. Children are fascinated with the way their bodies change. It's common for them to look at and touch each other's sex organs. This is one of the ways that they learn that they are normal. They do this with friends of both sexes. This kind of sex play does not make a child gay or straight.

### **Most 12 year olds:**

- Are ready to know about sex and how babies are made.
- Want to know about sexual relationships and friendships.
- Need to know about sexually transmitted diseases, contraception (for both boys and girls), and what it would mean for their lives if they became a teenage dad or mom.
- Need to have the confidence and the skill to be able to say “No”.
- Should understand what “safer sex” is, and that having safer sex lowers the risk of spreading sexually transmitted diseases.
- Must know how to try to have relationships without getting hurt and without hurting other people.



## Teenagers: 13 to 18 years old

**T**eens often have a deep worry about being different. They are easy targets for peer pressure and bad advice. We must tell them that their sexuality and feelings are normal. If your child is lesbian or gay, you will have to give her or him even more reassurance and support.

All teens have to make sexual decisions.

If your son or daughter is thinking about having sex, have a discussion around some of these questions. It will help him or her to think carefully and make wise decisions.

- Are you embarrassed about being a virgin?
- Do you know how to protect yourself from pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection?
- Do you feel you are being pressurised into having sex?
- Are you pressuring someone to have sex with you?
- Will having sex make you feel differently about yourself?
- Is trying to be more popular a good reason to have sex?
- Should you have to have sex with a girlfriend or boyfriend?
  - Are you thinking about having sex because your parents told you not to?
- Do you know what your limits are, that is, when you want to stop a sexual activity that has started? Will you be able to let your boyfriend or girlfriend know your limits?



- Will they listen and respect you if you say, "I want to stop now", or "This is going too far", "No", or "This is hurting me"?
- If your partner says "No", will you stop?
- Are you emotionally and financially ready to accept what comes with being a teenage dad or mom?
- Will you be taken advantage of, or take advantage of someone else?
- Will you be able to get your sexual partner to agree to wear a condom?

## Helpful hints for parents

**H**ere are some ideas you can think about in your parenting:

- Set good examples in how you deal with things in life.
- Tell your children that they're normal.
- Respect your teenager's privacy as much as you value your own. Try not to interfere.
- Let them know that you trust and respect them.
- Use correct names for sex organs and sexual behaviour.
- If you don't, you give the idea that there is something wrong, funny or bad about them and about sex.
- Take advantage of "teachable moments".
- Be sensitive when you talk about sex. A girl may not want to talk about it when boys and girls are around. Boys may not want girls or women to be around when they talk about sex. Girls may prefer to talk with women and boys with men. But this is not always the case if parents speak openly about sex and sexuality at home.



- Build their self-esteem and confidence. Praise them for their talents, personalities and achievements.
- Give correct, honest, short and simple answers to your child's questions.
- There are non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that offer advice and information, like the Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa (PPASA). Seek out organisations that can help you.
- Try to get information that is up-to-date and that deals with sex and sexuality in a modern and progressive way.
- Don't judge questions. For example if your child asks you: "How old do you have to be to have sex?" It doesn't mean they are thinking of having it. Perhaps you could ask them what they think first. You could say: "I don't have an answer for that right now. Let's talk about it. What do you think?"
- When your child asks questions about sex this is often because she is trying to understand family values.
- Let your children know that you are there for them.
- Share what you think and feel with them in a way that they will understand.
- Ask them questions, even if they don't ask you questions. Ask them about what they think and what they know. This way you will help them to develop ideas and views about sex and sexuality.
- Be clear about your own feelings and values.
- Admit when you don't know an answer. We can help our

children (and ourselves) find answers by asking people who are experts, like health workers; and by reading good books, magazines, information pamphlets and booklets.

Always find out what your child wants to know about, and try to help him or her find the answers.

- Work out what you want to say before you say it.
- Talk about things that worry you with your partner, a friend or





someone you trust. This usually helps you to work out how you want to talk with your child. This also builds your confidence when talking about sex and sexuality.

- Don't betray your child's trust by telling others personal information that he or she has told you.
- Use teenagers' mistakes as good times for learning. If you criticise, nag, lecture, judge or shout you will push your child away from you.
- Get to know more about the world your children live in. What pressures and stresses do they have?
- Your child's idea of "normal" may be very different to yours on some issues. Try to understand rather than judge them. This way, you will build good communication with your children.
- If you show interest in their activities and friends your children will know you care. They are more likely to want you to be part of their lives.

## Did you know?

Recent research on children and teenagers in South Africa shows that:

- Many teenagers have sex at a very young age. A study showed that the average age teenagers have sex for the first time is at fourteen for boys and at fifteen years old for girls. Reports of children having sex from the age of twelve, or even younger, are getting more common.
- Most teenagers do not use any contraception when they have sex.
- Most sexually active teenagers have more than one partner.
- Most young people do not get enough or proper sexuality education from their parents.
- Many schools in our country still do not offer sexuality education.
- Most parents want schools to offer sexuality education.
- One in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused

- by the age of eighteen.
- South Africa has one of the highest pregnancy rates in the world. At present, 330 out of every 1 000 pregnant women are teenagers.
- Every year many teenagers get sexually transmitted diseases.
- HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is spreading most quickly among young people between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Young women are especially at risk. In 1997, the Department of Health estimated that there were about 1000 new HIV infections in South African men, women and children every day. This figure increases every year.
- South Africa has one of the highest rape incidences in the world. Date rape, that is, girls and women who are raped by a person who they went out with, is very common. We have to help girls and young women in particular to learn how to defend themselves. And bring up boys to know that it is against the law, and unacceptable, to force someone to have sex against their will. This is rape.

## Sexuality education at school

Parents, schools and the community need to work as a team to educate children about sex and sexuality. The Department of Education has decided to introduce Life Orientation into schools as a new learning area. This is part of Curriculum 2005. Life Orientation will include sexuality education.

## What is sexuality education?

Sexuality education aims to:

- Help young people develop a positive idea about sexuality.
- Give correct information.
- Promote discussions that help young people work out what their values are. And to promote positive values in life.
- Teach young people skills that will help them to make

wise, informed decisions about sex and sexuality.

- Help children to learn how to stand up for themselves, and how to negotiate.
- Raise awareness around child abuse.

The Department of Education wants children to learn to:

- Like and respect themselves.
- Respect other people's right to have their own beliefs and values.
- Show value and respect for human rights, like with ubuntu and other similar ways of thinking.
- Be able to practice the life and decision-making skills they learn.
- Work out their own idea of what is right and wrong.

Teachers should encourage teenagers to treat sexuality as a natural and good part of their lives. Teachers also have an important role to play in helping them to make wise, informed decisions about their sexuality.

Parents can go to school meetings to talk about what will be discussed in sexuality education classes.

## Conclusion

Take the lead when it comes to talking with your children about sex and sexuality. Learning starts at birth. You can provide correct information, help build skills, and encourage your children to develop their values and beliefs. This will all help them to make wise decisions.

Try to keep communication open so that you are really in touch with your child's life.

The more children know about sexuality and contraception, the more likely they are to make wise and well-informed decisions about their own sexuality.



