



It's time ... to talk about it! Talk early, talk often. Prevent sexual violence.

Resource for parents & caregivers

Parents and caregivers have a tremendous impact on the way their children experience the world around them. Accurate and age-appropriate information can support parents as they guide children through the world and help them shape their values. Modeling respectful behaviors and boundaries, as well as sharing age-appropriate information, can counter unhealthy social norms around sexuality and relationships.

What can parents do to promote healthy and appropriate behaviors in childhood?

When it comes to child sexual abuse, knowledge of childhood development and age-appropriate behaviors can assist parents in discussions with their children about unhealthy behaviors or abusive touch. Understanding behaviors that are developmentally expected and healthy in children gives parents a foundation of knowledge to encourage children's development in all areas without shame or confusion. There are many ways parents and adults who care about the welfare of children can assist in promoting healthy childhood development (National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2011):

- Develop safe, positive, and open communication patterns, particularly around sexuality and development. When adults answer questions with age-appropriate and candid responses, they build confidence and trust with their children as they grow and engage in friendships and relationships. This can become especially important when talking to them about unwanted touching and harmful or unsafe secrets.

- It is not only important to answer questions as they come up, but to also start the conversation with your child about relationships, sex, and sexuality, opening the door to future conversations or questions. For example, a parent could tell their child, *"When I was your age, I had a lot of questions about my body and other people's bodies. Do you have any questions you want to talk about?"* Other teachable moments may occur spontaneously, as children express natural curiosity about their bodies and others' bodies. Parents can create a safe environment for ongoing communication by being open and positive toward their children when these questions are raised or when opportunities occur to talk about healthy sexual development.

- Be a role model for respectful boundaries when it comes to touch and affection. If a child does not feel comfortable hugging someone, even if it is someone the parent cares about, the parent should honor that boundary.

Parents can take a few easy steps toward having healthy, open conversations with children. The following resources and exercises are intended to build skills depending on comfort and knowledge level.



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Step One: Assessing comfort level

Many topics and behaviors are part of healthy childhood sexual development. Before talking with your child about healthy and age-appropriate behaviors, it is helpful for parents to understand their own comfort level. To feel best prepared, identify topics you are comfortable discussing and finding some topics to explore further. This resource offers strategies for parents in starting this assessment process by looking at specific topics, identifying comfort level and personal values, and how to discuss this information.

Thinking about what children may need to know or how to approach a topic before it comes up can make it easier for parents to start the discussion. As a parent, it is helpful to understand knowledge and comfort level. This can help parents to open the lines of communication with their children around topics of sexuality and build on teachable moments. The *Resource for Parents: Talking to your child* gives parents an opportunity to list what areas are most familiar to them and what they are comfortable discussing. Once parents understand where there is the most potential to grow, it is important to seek resources and support to help fill these gaps.

Along the same lines of assessing comfort and knowledge, it is important to reflect on the values and norms children need to become healthy and engaged adults. Consider the following questions and discuss them with family members or other parents as a way to identify values and feel more comfortable sharing this information with your child (Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape [adapted from PCAR], 2012).

Tips for talking with your child:

- Be honest and recognize how uncomfortable or difficult the conversation may be for you, "*Sometimes, I feel like I don't have all the answers, but it's really important for us to talk about...*"
- Criticizing all media may create a distance or disconnect with a child who sees it as incredibly important. Remain conversational and open, while still staying true and authentic to your values. Look for opportunities to highlight media that represents positive behaviors, and use this as a tool or example in discussion.
- Frame your conversation in a positive, open way to help reduce a child's discomfort with the topic or feeling of being in trouble or embarrassed.
- Stay calm. If the conversation gets off track, try to steer it back and into a conversation that is age-appropriate and to the point (Ferrell, 2008, pp. 26). Parents should remember that simple information and direct answers are often what children are looking for when it comes to talking about sexuality and development.
- Seek resources for additional support in starting the conversation, such as *It's time... to talk to your child about healthy sexuality* (NSVRC, 2012). Additional information can help you feel prepared and equipped to talk with your child.



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- *What do I want my child/children to know about sex education, sexual development, sexual abuse prevention, and healthy sexuality? How are/would they get that information?*
- *What specific lessons or values do I want my children to experience? Who do I want them to learn them from (in addition to me)?*
- *What sources am I comfortable with my children getting information from (e.g., the internet, teachers, doctors, family members, friends, or neighbors)?*
- *What steps can I take when my child receives information and messages from other sources that conflict with the values and lessons I have shared?*

Step Two: Resources to support talking to your child

Having access to accurate and easy-to-understand information can increase comfort and willingness to talk about sexuality. The resources listed below offer parents guidance on how to approach the subject of sexuality with your children, providing helpful language and information on specific topics, such as masturbation.

- **Ch!ldren Now:**
Talking with kids about tough issues: Sex & relationships
http://www.childrennow.org/index.php/learn/twk_sex
- **HealthyChildren.org:**
Information about Masturbation
<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/puberty/Pages/Masturbation.aspx>
- **Oprah.com:**
Talking to your kids about sex: Turning "the talk" into a conversation for life by Dr. Laura Berman
<http://www.oprah.com/relationships/Download-Dr-Laura-Bermans-Talking-to-Kids-About-Sex-Handbook>

- **ParentingMagazine.com:**
Talking to kids about sex
<http://www.parenting.com/article/talking-to-kids-about-sex-21335549>
- **Planned Parenthood Federation of America:**
Talking with kids about sex and sexuality
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/talking-kids-about-sex-sexuality-37962.htm>
- **Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States:**
Families are Talking
<http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewPage&pageID=632&nodeID=1>

In addition to these resources, parents can refer to *An overview of healthy childhood sexual development* (NSVRC, 2013) for a more detailed look at stages of childhood sexual development and general information on understanding human sexuality.

Step Three: Give it a try

Starting the conversation can be the hardest part. Children are often confronted with unhealthy representations of sexuality through TV shows, commercials, advertisements, and other forms of media. Although these words and images influence how children view sexuality, parents play a key role in sharing values and supporting healthy choices. Below are some conversation starters to open dialogue with your young child (Ferrell, 2008; PCAR, 2012):

- *Remember when we talked about some of the differences and different things boys and girls may like. I wanted to talk about a few more things. You asked why boys and girls sometimes like different colors or toys, and I said everybody has different likes and differences. It is also true that boys' and girls' bodies are different.*



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- *Gabby, sometimes someone wants to give me a hug, and I don't feel like it or that person makes me uncomfortable. Have you ever felt that way? It's OK to say no or talk about it when we feel this way. Tell me how you feel, so I can make do my best to help.*
- *Michael, I noticed Uncle Joe giving you lots of hugs at the birthday party on Saturday. How did that feel to you? Was that okay? Did you like all of those hugs?*

Talking to other adults

In addition to talking with your child, parents need to be comfortable discussing healthy childhood sexual development with other adults. It is important that adults talk with other adults about healthy sexual development so that the larger environments in which children gather, learn, and play are sending consistently positive, supportive messages about sexuality and safety.

Respectful conversations can support adults as allies to the children in their lives, as well as create a community that supports healthy childhood development. These conversations also give adults the confidence to address any inappropriate or unhealthy actions or attitudes in other adults. For example:

- *Dad, I know you really want Sarah to hug and kiss you "hello" and "goodbye," and when she refuses, you may feel hurt or disappointed. As her grandfather, please don't take it personally. We are just trying to teach her that her body belongs to her and that we should always ask permission before we hug or kiss other people. She is practicing those skills and asserting herself and her boundaries.*
- *Alice, it is great that you are willing to babysit Daniel and Susana this evening. I wanted to let you know about some of our*

family rules. One rule in our family is to knock on the bathroom door before entering the restroom. We respect one another's privacy and ask that you follow these guidelines with the children.

To learn more about adults involved in preventing child sexual abuse, refer to *Resource for Community Members*. For additional information:

- **Stop it Now!:**

Let's talk: Speaking up to prevent child sexual abuse
http://www.stopitnow.org/files/Lets_Talk.pdf

References

Ferrell, K. (2008, Winter). Adolescent sexuality: Talk the talk before they walk the walk. *Healthy Children*, 24-26. Available from the American Academy of Pediatrics: <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/our-mission/Pages/Healthy-Children-Winter-2008.aspx>

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