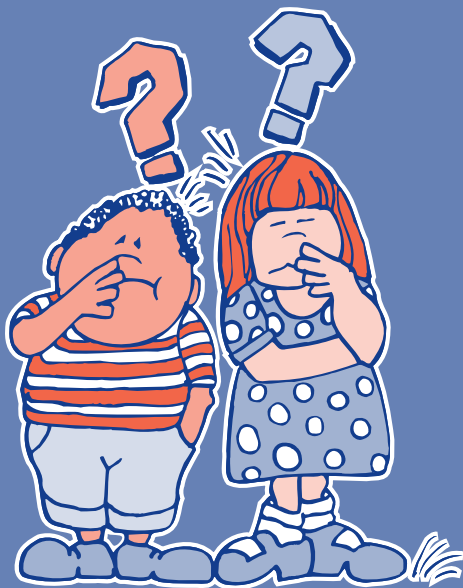


Talk Sex



Kids are curious.

They want to know where babies come from and how bodies work. This pamphlet will help you decide how you want to teach your child about sexuality.

Parents are the most important sex educators of their children

The lifelong process of learning about sexuality begins when a child is born. As a parent or guardian, you have the opportunity to help your child grow up to be a loving, caring, sexually healthy adult.

Sexuality is much more than sex. It includes our sense of who we are and how we feel about ourselves as sexual beings. You teach your child both by what you do and what you say. The tone of your voice and the feelings you express are as important as the words you use.

Most of us grew up with confusing messages about sex. If you grew up with little or no information, or if you grew up with negative messages, you may feel uncomfortable talking with your own child.

Things to consider:

- Who talked to you about sex and what was that like?
- What are your own attitudes about sexuality?
- Have you thought about the way you want to talk with your child?

Why parents need to teach their children about sexuality

- Children are curious about their bodies and sexuality.
- Children see things around them that are confusing. As they grow, they learn about sexuality from many sources, both positive and negative: TV, the Internet, video games, movies, friends, family, and school.

- When you welcome their questions, children learn that they can come to you, that it's OK to talk about these things.
- Children learn from you what it means to be sexually healthy.
- Children need your guidance to learn what sexual behaviour is acceptable and what is not.
- It's important for children to learn their family and cultural values.

The growing up years

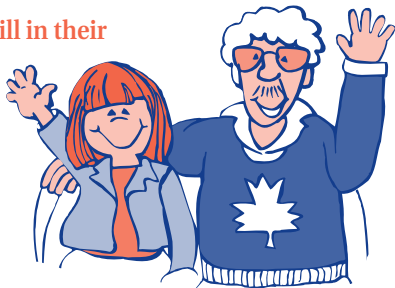
There are common sexual behaviours for children at different ages. Some of these behaviours are linked to curiosity, others to sexual feelings.

Birth to age two

Children may:

- explore body parts, including the genitals
- experience pleasure from touch to all body parts including their genitals
- begin to develop a positive or negative attitude towards their own body
- start to learn expectations of behaviours for boys and girls

Boys may have erections while still in their mother's womb; girls produce vaginal lubrication shortly after birth.



Touch

Children have feelings about their bodies long before they can talk. As you cuddle, feed, bathe and talk to your child, good feelings about their bodies grow. Children need positive touch to thrive. When babies first explore their genitals, some parents are not sure what to do. Letting them touch themselves makes it clear that their whole body belongs to them, and that feelings of pleasure are good and natural.

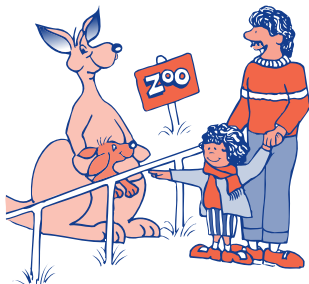
Words

It is important to give your child words for every part of their body. Teach them dictionary words. This makes their genitals as normal as any other part of the body. It also means there will be no mistake when they need to be clear about these parts if there is a problem. Start practising saying penis, scrotum, vulva and vagina. These are words they will be using when they go to child care and school.

Ages three and four

Children may:

- be curious about sex and body differences
- begin to establish a clear idea about gender
- try to look at people and touch them when they are nude or undressing
- enjoy examining their genitals and self-pleasuring
- have sexual exploration with friends and siblings
- learn sex words including bathroom and swear words
- be curious about how babies are made and born



Gender exploration

As part of play, children like to dress up and experiment with gender roles. Parents often encourage children to wear clothing, play with toys and participate in sports they feel are suitable for their child's gender. But playing and dressing outside usual gender roles is natural for children. Most children end up behaving the way society expects them to. Other children do not fit into this mold. Some people describe this behaviour as "gender variant". There are also children who feel and say that they are not the gender they appear to be. You may hear the term "transgender".



Sexual exploration

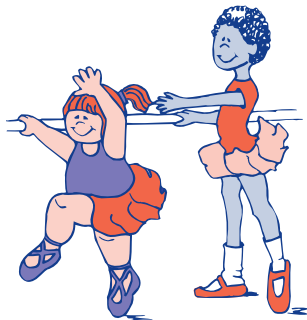
Children are curious about themselves and others. This may lead to sexual exploration with other children. They are learning the physical differences between boys and girls, as well as what's the same. Most of this exploration is expected. However, some behaviours may worry you: a child may tell you that they were forced or bribed to do something sexual; or you may come across two children with a big age difference who have taken their clothes off; or you may come across a sexual activity that looks like what adults would do. If you are concerned, call a Children's Aid Society.

Ages five to eight

Children may:

- learn what is acceptable and unacceptable to adults
- use sexual language to shock, tease, joke, impress friends
- continue sexual exploration with children of the same and/or opposite sex
- continue self-pleasuring (masturbation)
- try to look at people when they are undressing or at pictures of naked people
- become modest or shy about their bodies

As your child becomes more independent, they will be exposed to more sexual images. Their friends may have dolls that look like sexy girls; they may want to dress or act like people they see on TV or in magazines. They may see sexual images in video games, on the computer at home or at a friend's. It is important to find out what your child is seeing. If they come to you, talk with them about what they saw, how they felt and why it is not healthy for them to see sexual images intended for adults.



Ages nine to twelve

Children may:

- continue sexual exploration and self-pleasuring (masturbation)
- seek out same-sex peer groups; tease and chase children of the opposite sex

- start to show signs of puberty
- be more easily affected by friends, the media, including increased exposure to sexual images on the Internet
- have fantasies and crushes on people who are their age or older, the same or opposite sex

As your child realizes that their body is starting to change, they may have mixed feelings about it. Teach them about these changes before they happen so there will be no surprises. Find a book about puberty at the library or bookstore for them to read, or, if they'll let you, read it together. Puberty education is part of the Ontario school curriculum. Find out when it will be taught at school so you can talk with your child about what they are learning.

A word about teens

It is a normal part of development for teens to pull away from their parents while still being emotionally tied to them. You have already laid the foundation for the challenges of adolescence by the values and attitudes you have taught your child.

Don't be afraid to explain your feelings to your teen and set limits. Let them know you are there to talk whenever they need to.



General tips for talking with your child about sex

- Whenever a child asks a question, respond, even if the reply is “Good question. Let’s talk about that later.” (But don’t forget to talk about it!)
- Find a time and place that is comfortable for both of you, like when you are doing something together, or at bedtime.
- When there is an opportunity – take it. You might start a discussion about something on TV, or about someone you know who is pregnant. Sometimes children see sexual images on a computer screen – often by accident. They may have strong, possibly negative, feelings about what they saw. They need to talk with you about it.
- Be honest. If you don’t tell your child the truth, sooner or later, they will find out, and may no longer trust your information. They could also be embarrassed by repeating incorrect information in front of others, who might make fun of them.
- Let the child know when you feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or you don’t know an answer. It’s OK.
- Some children will ask questions, but others will hesitate. You may need to start the conversation.
- Clarify what your child really wants to know before you answer.
- Make your answers honest, short and simple. You don’t need to know everything about sex to teach your child what he or she wants to know. What you don’t know, you can find out.
- Give information using words and ideas they can understand at their age.
- Find out how much your child already knows; and don’t be surprised by what they already know.

The BIG question: “Where do babies come from?”

Answer for a four year old:

“Babies grow in a special place in a woman’s body called a ‘uterus’ or ‘womb’.”

Answer for a ten year old:

“You remember that babies grow in a woman’s uterus, right? It grows after a sperm from a man’s body joins with an egg from the woman’s body. That can happen when a man and a woman have sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse is something people can do when they want to be really close with each other. They may kiss and touch and take off their clothes. If they both want to, the woman will let the man’s erect penis slip into her vagina. A fluid called semen, (with millions of sperm cells in it) will come out of the penis and into the woman’s vagina. If a sperm cell meets with the woman’s egg cell in her fallopian tube, the egg is fertilized. A group of cells form. If these cells attach to the wall of the woman’s uterus, a baby will grow over the next 9 months. There are other ways to make a baby, but that’s how it usually happens.



Some questions lead us to answers that help children develop positive, accepting attitudes.

“Why does Alice have two moms?”

Answer:

“Alice’s moms are a couple. They’re gay. The three of them make a family. Some kids have one mom and one dad; some kids have two moms, some have two dads. Some kids have more than two parents and some have just one parent. Every family is different.”

Kids worry: “If I’m supposed to be a girl, why do I feel like I want to be a boy?”

Answer:

“I’m glad you told me. It’s who you feel you are on the inside that’s important. I love you and want you to be yourself.”

Kids know more than you think.

“On this TV show, a man had a baby. How did that happen?”

Answer:

“I heard about that show. He was born female and had ‘female’ parts. When he started living as a man, he kept those parts, so he was able to get pregnant.”

“What’s oral sex?”

Answer:

“That means using the mouth on another person’s genitals.”

Sometimes you need to find out how much your child already knows.

“What does ‘rape’ mean?”

Answer:

“What do you think it means?” is a good start. Then explain it means doing something sexual that the other person doesn’t want.

Some final tips

- Take time to think about how to answer a child’s question. You may want to talk with another adult first. If you aren’t satisfied with the information you gave or the way you handled a situation, start again. “Remember when I told you that those things you found in my drawer were a type of balloon? They are called condoms. People use them so that they won’t start a baby and also to stop certain germs from spreading.”
- If two parents are raising a child, try to talk over what you say. You don’t have to agree on everything as long as it is not too confusing for the child.

- There are times when it may be better for a parent not to talk; for example, when an adult is having sexual problems, in the middle of a family crisis, or when they are embarrassed, disgusted or fearful about sex. A book or a pamphlet, a family friend or a trusted teacher may be a better source of information at this time.
- If your child reacts strongly when you raise the subject, don't push him or her to talk. But make sure your child knows that you are willing to talk - and listen.

Resources

Your local library and children's bookstore are good places to ask about books and DVDs for both children and parents.

Public Health Units and Canadian Federation for Sexual Health offices have staff who will speak to parents' groups.

Contact Toronto Public Health for information about workshops.

You can also call the AIDS & Sexual Health InfoLine at 416-392-2437