

# Talking with Children about Sexuality

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A lot of important topics fall under the umbrella of sexuality: anatomy, self care, body image, social norms, consent, abuse prevention, gender identity, sexual orientation, relationships and reproduction. These are not topics we save up for one big conversation when our kid hits puberty! Instead, we can talk about them a little at a time, in *age appropriate ways*, from when our children are very young. These conversations give our children the information they need to stay safe and healthy, give us opportunities to share our family values, and let our kids know that we are available as a resource to them as they navigate these waters.

Here are suggestions for topics to address and possible messages to share with your child. All families have their own values, and you know your own child best, so adapt as needed.

- **Understanding Their Own Body, How It Works, and How to Keep It Healthy**
  - Potty training (age 2 – 4): Teach your child correct anatomical terms (e.g. penis, vagina, urine, bowel movement...) This enables them to communicate with doctors and others. Teach how to care for their bodies – how to wipe after using the toilet, and how to wash their private parts.
  - When they become curious about other people's bodies that are different from theirs (often age 4 – 6), answer their questions.
  - By age 8 or 9 – *before* they and their friends experience them, they need to know the basics of puberty, the menstrual cycle, and/or wet dreams / nocturnal emissions.
  - By age 10 – *before* they and their friends are likely to be sexually active, talk about sexual health, contraception, prevention of STIs and delaying sexual activity.
- **How They Feel About Their Bodies – Body Image.** Throughout your child's life, be conscious of how you talk about your own body image in front of them, be aware of the impact of media messages and peer pressure, and reinforce healthy, realistic attitudes.
- **Understanding Social Norms about Nudity and Public vs. Private Behavior**
  - Under age 4: Teach the idea of 'private parts' – body parts that a swimsuit covers – and family / cultural norms about when it's OK (or not) to show or touch them.
  - At age 4 – 6, children may try to sneak a peek at others, or touch others. They may also test out potty humor and swear words. Explain family values, and set limits for what is appropriate and in what contexts.
  - At age 7 – 12: Kids may play truth or dare style kissing games, they may seek out pictures of nudity or look up words in the dictionary. Set parental controls, monitor media usage, and also talk to children about pornography.
  - It's important for you to teach your child *your* family values and standards. For children ages 5 and up, explain that different people may have different standards.
- **Bodily Autonomy**
  - Don't require that your child give hugs or kisses to anyone if they don't want to. Before tickling or rough-housing, ask them if they want that. Stop playing every once in a while and ask "are you still having fun? Do you want to keep playing?"
  - Teach that it's not OK for others to touch their private parts without permission. Even parents and doctors should explain why they need to and ask if it's OK.

- Talk about healthy touch – touch that is comforting, welcome, and pleasant – versus unhealthy – intrusive, unwelcome, uncomfortable. Tell them what to do, and who they can talk to, if someone touches them in a way that makes them uncomfortable.
- Instead of teaching about “stranger danger”, teach about “tricky people.” Learn how: <https://gooddayswithkids.com/2017/02/13/tricky-people/>
- **Learning to Ask for Consent Before Touching Others.** Encourage your child to ask before giving hugs and kisses or climbing in someone’s lap. They should also not assume just because someone has welcomed their touch in the past means they want it right now.
- **Gender Identity / Roles.** There are many components of gender: a person’s biological sex (body parts), gender identity (do they view themselves as male or female), expression (how they dress, wear their hair), and gender roles (what others expect them to be do). Think about your family values, and how you communicate them with what you say and do. [www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents/preschool/how-do-i-talk-with-my-preschooler-about-identity](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents/preschool/how-do-i-talk-with-my-preschooler-about-identity)
- **Sexual Orientation and Attraction.** Kids often explore the idea of couple relationships. They may talk about getting married to a playmate, or imitate behaviors such as holding hands and kissing. They may work to figure out the difference between liking a friend, loving a family member, being attracted to someone and being in love. By age 4 or 5, most children have noticed that it is more common for males to be in relationships with females. Think about your family values about sexual orientation and same gender relationships and share those with your children with your words and actions.
- **Babies and Sex:** Preschoolers notice pregnant bellies and may tell you that babies come from mommies. They may want to know how the baby will get out. But age 5, children may get curious about how the baby got in there. For a preschooler, we might tell them that a man’s sperm and a woman’s egg make a baby, and the mother carries the baby in her uterus. For a 5 – 6 year old, many parents talk about how a man and woman lay together in a special way to make a baby. For older elementary students you may talk in more detail about sex, and also address the fact that sex can make a baby, but more often adults engage in sex because it feels good to adults.
- **Healthy Relationships with Others:** Throughout your child’s early years, your words and actions, and those of other people in their lives, model for them what to expect from relationships. Try to model healthy relationships. If there are unhealthy relationships in your environment, try to insulate younger children from them, and talk to older children about them. In general, a healthy relationship is one where you feel good about yourself, you feel supported and valued by the other person, and you feel safe with them.

## When and How to Have the Conversation

Answer questions as they come up. Look for teachable moments: When you happen to see something in a book, a movie, or people watching, just drop in a few little tidbits of information.

Before dumping on a lot of information, first ask them what they already know about a topic – that helps you set your conversation at the appropriate level of sophistication and also lets you catch and clear up any misconceptions they have.

Buy a book or two. For younger children, you may read them together. For older children, we often just have them available for them to use as a resource whenever they want to.

**Here are some recommended books for kids:** Preschool age: [Amazing You](#) by Saltz. Early elementary: [What’s the Big Secret](#) by Brown. Upper elementary: [It’s So Amazing!](#) by Harris.

**For more details, and links to more resources,** see: [www.GoodDaysWithKids.com](http://www.GoodDaysWithKids.com).