

It's Not Too Early to Talk About Sex

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A talk about sexuality is not just a discussion about sex. It encompasses much more. It includes: a 2 to 3-year-old's understanding of differences in his or her body, a 4 to 5-year-old's curiosity about his or her body parts and understanding what makes us male and female, a pre-pubertal child's concerns about body changes (pubertal changes) and sexuality as part of a relationship.

A discussion about these issues should be addressed as soon as they come up. Parents should take advantage of the many teachable moments to talk to their child about sexuality. The more knowledgeable the child is, the less anxious he or she may be about the changes that will occur physically, intellectually and emotionally. Parents should answer the questions honestly as they come up with as much detail as is necessary to meet the child's curiosity.

Attempts should be made to ensure the child learns from parents rather than friends or media. Optimally, parents should be recognized as experts; however, the family pediatrician or physician can help coach the parents on how to talk to their child about sexuality and recommend helpful resources.

Tips for talking to your child about sexuality:

- Do not laugh or giggle, even if the question is cute. Your child should not be made to feel ashamed for his or her curiosity.
- Try not to appear overly embarrassed or too serious about the matter.
- Be brief. Do not go into a long explanation. Answer in simple terms. Your 4-year-old does not need to know the details of intercourse.
- Use proper names for all body parts.
- See if your child wants or needs further explanation. Follow up your answers with, "Does that answer your question?"

- Listen to your child's responses and reactions.
- Be prepared to repeat yourself.
- Try to stay relaxed about the conversation. If you are uncomfortable, you could make your child uncomfortable.

Encouraging your children to have respect for their body and sexuality will enhance their potential for healthy relationships. Making sure parents model this respect will further encourage these healthy relationships.

For 2 and 3-year-olds, just answer the questions using correct terms for body parts. For 4 and 5-year-olds, clearly define the rules with respect to the body and sexuality. An interest in genital organs is healthy and natural. Let your child know that nudity and sexual play in public is not okay. Tell your child that no other person, including close friends and relatives, may touch his or her "private parts." Explain that private parts are what a bathing suit covers. The exceptions are doctors and nurses during physical exams and his or her parents when they are trying to find the cause of any pain in the genital area.

By ages 8 and 9, answer questions and if the child seems ready, start to talk about body changes. Some 8-year-olds will start puberty at this time.

By ages 11 and 12, most children are ready to have the discussion about sexuality as part of a relationship. If a parent does not initiate the conversation the child will learn from other sources such as media and friends without a parent's opportunity to clarify their values with respect for sexuality.

By ages 13 and 14, it may be too late to talk about sexual intercourse, the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). At this time, it may be more appropriate to discuss contraception. Inform them of your thoughts and opinions about contraception. Condoms or the pill by themselves

are not adequate to prevent pregnancy. Although condoms do prevent many STIs, they can still be acquired by oral sex.

A few pieces of data that may support this opinion:

- One study showed that STIs were found in 14 percent of 14 and 15-year-olds and 34 percent of 18 and 19-year-olds.
- 38 percent of sexually active adolescents had an STI.

By ages 16 through 18, a continued discussion should occur about the risks associated with being sexually active, including both physical and emotional consequences.

Talking about sex and sexuality gives you a chance to share your values and beliefs with your child. Sometimes the topic or the questions may seem embarrassing, but your child needs to know there is always a reliable, honest source he or she can turn to for answers—you.

For more information, including STI statistics, please visit www.cdc.gov/std.

www.essehealth.com