

How to Teach Your Child About Sex

Many parents, eager to teach their children how to eat, drink, play, walk, talk, and read, are anxious when it comes to teaching them about sex. But sex education begins at birth. Children learn about sex in the way they're touched, caressed, cuddled and cared for as infants. They continue to learn through exploration and by discovering how their bodies feel to themselves. They learn what's OK or not, from their parents, and by listening to what words family members say and don't say, when referring to body parts. They also learn by observing how people express affection and caring for one another. In our media-driven highly sexualized culture it's more important than ever for parents to be attentive to what their child may be taking in and to put age-appropriate controls in place to protect their child from inaccurate or inappropriate information.

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While a child's sexual development begins at birth, it does have milestones which vary some from child to child and can be affected by trauma or illness, so it's important to understand what baseline guidelines relate to the characteristics of normal sexual development for different age groups. The following outline, developed by Prevent Child Abuse Georgia for a Promises to Keep Training Institute (2006) provides this information in practical terms:

Infancy: 0-2 years of age

Characteristics of Development

- sensory learning
- natural to touch genitals
- developing trust and capacity for pleasure
- gender and gender role development
- physical reflex responses

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Promoting Healthy Development

- help baby recognize correct names for body parts, including genitals
- affirm child's capacity to experience pleasure from touch
- help child differentiate between male and female
- provide opportunities for social interaction with same age peers

Ages 2 to 5

Characteristics of Sexual Development

- more curiosity about their own bodies and those of others
- self-soothing touches to genitals increase
- intimate behavior associated with gender
- toilet training
- “playing doctor” and “playing house”
- cross gender behavior

Promoting Healthy Development

- be supportive not punitive in toilet training
- use inappropriate behavior as an opportunity to teach appropriate behavior
- try not to shame self-soothing behavior or punish it

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- help child understand human reproduction with simple but accurate descriptions

Ages 6-9:

Characteristics of Sexual Development

- socialization
- gender identity and gender consistency
- interest in reproduction
- sex play goes underground
- understanding of orientation

Promoting Healthy Development

- give accurate information about reproduction
- prepare child for ongoing changes of puberty
- teach norms as far as sexuality, including privacy and nudity
- reinforce boundaries and body safety

Ages 10-15:

Characteristics of Sexual Development

- accelerated growth
- more adult appearance

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- preoccupation with physical appearance
- hairy, sweaty, stinky, and pimply
- establishing sexual identity/orientation
- more focus on pleasure in masturbation

Promoting Healthy Development

- make your child aware of the changes that will occur
- emphasize changes in hygiene
- media literacy skills
- discuss rights and responsibilities
- educate yourself and them on STD's and birth control
- clarify terms

Remember that talking with your child about sex needs to begin early, and should be a continual process, not a one-time event. The best advice I received when rearing my own children, was to begin talking about sex long before they were emotionally involved; before hormones, adolescent embarrassment, insecurity, curiosity, rebellion, and poor choices influenced by peer pressure, set in. The wisdom of that advice

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feels even more relevant to me today, in what some call our pornified culture, because of the multiple ways in which our children are being exploited.

Take the incidence of sexual abuse, for example. Studies conducted by Nora Harlow, MFA of the Child Molestation and Research Institute here in Atlanta, have determined that one in every four families experiences sexual abuse. In an average 8th grade class of 30 children, four girls have been molested, two boys have been molested, and one boy has molested a younger child (2007). National cybersex addiction expert, Stefanie Carnes, Ph.D., in a workshop for the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (2008), reported that one in five children who use computer chat rooms has been approached over the Internet by pedophiles and only 25% of youth who received sexual solicitation told a parent . In tandem, our

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media-driven culture has created an advertising industry that sexually objectifies women and adolescent girls and boys. Last month, walking by an Abercrombie and Fitch store in a local mall, I noticed a large black-and-white photograph of a healthy-looking teenage boy, wearing no shirt and more of his jockey-style underpants were showing than were his jeans. I was reminded in that instance of having seen a tee-shirt for girls made by the same company; across the breasts, it read: “Who needs a brain when you have these?” Scenarios like these have a powerful influence on our children, an influence that parents must wrestle with on a daily basis.

No wonder they’re reluctant to bring up the subject of sex with their children. What mom or dad, looking down at her or his innocent 5-year-old, doesn’t wish that their child wouldn’t ever have to know that things such as sexual abuse or seductive

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advertising even exist. But they do. And the more we don't talk about it, and also don't teach ourselves and our children about healthy sexual development, the more we are grooming them to be abused and/or exploited.

Don't be afraid to talk to your young children about sex. Why should they know about the birds and the bees without knowing about people? You won't destroy their innocence by sharing with them the amazing story about how they were born. You will be telling them the sacred truth.

Reading books together can be a helpful bridge into the topic of sex. One of my favorite's for young children is *Where Did I Come From?*, by Peter Mayl and Arthur Robins . Their next book, *What's Happening to Me?* for children a little older, is excellent, too. And for children 7 or 8 through middle school, *It's so Amazing: A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies and*

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Families by Robie Haris and Michael Emberley is also very good, and more comprehensive, including multiple ways babies enter their parents lives. There are plenty of others, too. Peruse your book store to find one that feels like a good fit for you and your child.

Remember that the sex conversation is a continual process and is one of many ways you can protect your child and help her or him to become a strong, caring, and affectionate adult.