

Parents Can Foster Healthy Attitudes About Sex

by Mary Gossart

Even in elementary school, kids are learning all about sex—from their peers and from the media. Surely they deserve to learn from Mom and Dad.

When children are raised in an environment that values open, honest communication about sex, they are more likely to develop a healthy, respectful, and responsible attitude toward sexuality. Over the years, this translates into greater ability to make healthy, respectful, and responsible decisions about sex. Research, experience and just plain common sense confirm this.

Unfortunately, most families tend to shy away from the subject of sex. For parents, old anxieties give rise to concerns such as: “Maybe all this discussion with the kids about sex isn’t such a good thing. After all, we don’t want to encourage them, put ideas into their heads. Why not let them stay innocent as long as they can? They have plenty of time to learn about all this adult stuff.”

Sound familiar? Be assured, Mom and Dad, that the very least of your worries are “ideas” you might put into your child’s head. The reality is, young people are exposed to a daily barrage of sexual messages. Typically, those messages are inaccurate, often irresponsible, even exploitive.

As parents, you’re in an ideal position to clean up sexual “mythinformation.” In doing so, the ideas you put into your child’s head are about your family values around sexuality. They’re about accurate information; respectful, positive attitudes toward sexuality; and they’re about love, trust, and support.

But what about the fear that knowledge equals activity, that giving kids information about all this “adult stuff” encourages sexual experimentation? A long history of research indicates that such is not the case. In fact, teenagers are far more likely to learn by doing when they have been kept ignorant; have been given little or no opportunity for open, non-threatening discussion with their parents about sexual issues; and when their sex education has been left, by default, to peers and the media.

The results of trial-and-error sexuality education are disheartening at best. Often they are devastating: premature sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, children having children.

It’s never too late to begin. Certainly the ideal is to consciously and carefully attend to your child’s sexuality education from birth. In this way, you create a foundation that supports family communication about sex. This in turn increases the odds that your child will turn to you for the sexual information and guidance that become so essential during adolescence. But even if your family hasn’t established a history of open family communication about sex, recognize that parent input is important at all stages of a child’s development. Begin now.

Stuck for an opening line? Try something heartfelt and honest, such as: “You know, talking with you about sex is a little uncomfortable for me. My guess is that it’s hard for you, too. I do think it’s important that we talk, so maybe we can help each other out, OK?”

In terms of what to cover, keep in mind that kids aren’t just interested in sexual specifics. They want to know about the whole business of living: connecting and relating to others, and understanding themselves. Sharing your memories and innermost feelings about your own life and growing up years can give your child insight and comfort. It opens doors for communicating about a lot of things—including sex.

These conversations needn’t take on the air of THE BIG TALK. Simply be open to the naturally occurring, everyday events and issues which lend themselves to discussion about sexuality-related topics. As you consider your role as your child’s primary sexuality educator, consider the following strategies:

- Take advantage of the excellent, age-specific books/pamphlets available on the subject of sexuality. Read and discuss them as a family.
- Anticipate your child’s questions, then practice your responses ahead of time. Become familiar with typical sexual questions and behaviors that occur at various stages, which will reduce the chance of being caught off guard.
- Use TV, movies, and other media to initiate conversation. Certainly these provide ample opportunity for discussion about sex. Let your children know how you feel about sexual messages delivered by the media. Ask about their impressions.
- Call attention to newspaper articles dealing with issues linked to sexuality: AIDS, rape, surrogate parenting, abortion, teen-age pregnancy, sexual abuse. Don’t overlook them. Select the ones you feel are age-appropriate for discussion with your child.
- Answer questions as they come up. Don’t put them off—your child may not ask again.
- Be specific and use correct terminology. Of course, parents and children need a common vocabulary. If your child knows only slang words, be sure to translate. Then encourage the use of proper terms.
- Be clear about your values. This doesn’t mean being judgmental. Children want and need to hear the family values around sexuality. They also need to know that their opinions and feelings are listened to and respected.
- Establish an environment where your children feel free to ask questions. Let them know that you honor the right to be informed about sexuality.

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