



Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Vanessa Hamilton

Talking to children about sex: when & how?

Many of us can struggle with these conversations. Here are practical tips by age range for when, how and what to say when talking to children about sex.

- ▶ Young children's questions, comments and behaviors related to sexuality are not sexual.
- ▶ Children do not experience sexual desire or intent.
- ▶ Avoid letting your adult thoughts, experiences and views of the world get in the way of important simplified conversations you must have with your children.
- ▶ It is never too early or too late to start incorporating these conversations into your usual family discussions.
- ▶ Before starting school, children have learned about sexuality at home and in social surroundings such as the media.
- ▶ School will provide another platform for receiving messages about sexuality – both in the classroom and the playground.

We teach our kids every aspect of health and wellbeing. For example: healthy eating, road safety, water play and safety, enjoying nature and outdoors, good hygiene, oral care etc. But when it comes to human sexuality and preparing our kids for their sexual journey throughout life, many of us struggle. Some of us wish it wasn't, but it is our role to ensure children have enough accurate information about Human Sexuality.

What age should parents start talking with children about sexuality?

Sexuality starts at birth, your conversations have actually already started!

FROM 0 - 3 YEARS

Children have learned (hopefully) the correct names for body parts; they have an awareness of their own gender and some idea of the gender 'roles' that are shaped in our society. They have a natural curiosity about their own and others' bodies. They enjoy nudity, touch and cuddles as a pleasurable experience. They are taking notice of relationships around them and

how people speak to each other and speak to them. This is an important time for parents to encourage and develop positive messages about touch with no sense of shame.

Key early developmental factors in childhood sexuality include children's sense of self and ownership over their bodies. Respect and privacy discussions should start at this age.

Kids playing 'mummies and daddies' and 'I'll show you mine you show me yours' are usually just displaying normal body curiosity and role-playing their observations. They are exploring sexuality and developing social skills through play. Don't let your adult thoughts and perceptions of sexuality get in the way of the simple talks you must have with your kids.

If you have concerns about children's sexual behaviour, this is an excellent app: www.true.org.au/resources/resources-overview/traffic-lights-app

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SCHOOL AGE

'Most children are interested in how babies are made even if they have never spoken to you about it. They want to know where they came from. It is a perfect time to start discussions about how the egg and sperm get together, pregnancy and birth. Many children will be aware of some connection between sex, pleasure, secrecy and privacy. They will have overheard stories, talked about it in the playground and many will have received sexuality messages from advertising and TV. Your child should have a healthy understanding of conception & pregnancy by age 9 (at the latest!). Some more tips on how to have these discussions can be found here:

www.talkingthetalksexed.com.au/advice-and-tips

8 YEARS ONWARDS

Children need to know about the changes ahead for them as they transform from child to adult. Sex is not for children, so discussions around changing to an adult can eventually include when and how adults might engage in intimate experiences. These discussions are a good time to discuss the role of intimate connections, i.e. sexual intercourse, respect, consent, decision-making and pleasure are all important themes you should cover during some of your conversations.

TIPS FOR PARENTS FOR SEXUALITY CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN

- Take time to think about your vision for your child's sexual journey throughout

their adult life, what role will you play in guiding this outcome? Hopefully words like these come to mind: fun, safe, happy, joyful, healthy, resilient, empowered, fulfilling, respectful, informed, able to experience shared intimacy and pleasure.

- Don't avoid the topic, look for and use teachable moments:
 - "Oh seeing that pregnant woman reminds me that I want to talk to you about the amazing way that babies are made, what do you know about this already?"
 - "They just mentioned rape on the news – do you know what that means? Rape is about power over another person, forcing some one to do something sexual, it is illegal..."

Think PRAISE when put on the spot with difficult questions:

Positive: always try to respond positively. Buy yourself some time: "That's a great question. I'm glad you asked me about it... Where did you hear about that?"

Respectful Relationships: Speak with respect about human sexuality and encourage respect within relationships. Encourage respectful conversations about sexual orientation, practices and lifestyles.

Accurate: The information you give needs to be age-appropriate and accurate. Use the correct anatomical terms for body parts (penis, vulva, vagina). Teach parts of the body, behaviours, and privacy without shame or negativity.

Information: We know from research that young people who grow up informed about sex have better sexual outcomes such as: first sexual intercourse at a later age, less teen pregnancies, and less STIs. Also add in extra information that is relevant to your family's beliefs and values if needed.

Simple: Shape answers to the age group and don't over-complicate things. Answer only what is asked, and allow the child to ask for more information. The same question might pop up again over time, and you can give further information as they mature.

Empowerment: Empower them with strategies to avoid negative situations and provide alternative behaviour options. Explain that there are many things on the Internet that are not for children. Sometimes you can accidentally see something that gives you a yucky feeling in your tummy, or is scary. Teach them how to press the 'back' key, close the laptop or turn over the tablet, immediately, before coming to tell mum or dad, who will not be angry. Technology safety has never been more important.

Vanessa Hamilton

Vanessa Hamilton has worked as a Sexual and Reproductive Health Nurse for more than 20 years, provided Sexual Health Education to a variety of groups and individuals for 15 years, and is also mother of 3 children. Vanessa is passionate about empowering the current generation of children with essential information for safe and positive relationship experiences over their lifetime. www.talkingthetalksexed.com.au



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