

How to talk to your kids about sex

What NOT to do

- **Don't have The Big Talk on a long car trip.** Kids can feel trapped and like you're trying not to look at them. And there's no escape! Generally, it's a good idea to make sure that when you're talking about difficult subjects, everyone has somewhere to retreat to, so they can think things over. Short car trips work really well for some folks, though.
- **Don't have The Big Talk and think you're done.** That is, don't have one big conversation in which you discuss sexual reproduction and think that's all you have to do. Sex education happens a little bit at a time, and it's a lifelong conversation. Keep the lines of communication open. Be clear that it's okay to ask questions. Remember, sex education includes everything from anatomy, puberty, and reproduction to consent, STI and pregnancy prevention, family formation, and healthy relationships.
- **Don't act nervous and weird.** You transmit messages with nonverbal cues, too, and when you get tense or awkward, you are telling your child that sex and sexuality is un-speakable, that it shouldn't be talked about. Get comfortable with talking about sex through education, research, practice, sharing information with other parents... whatever you need to do.
- **Don't just hand over a book.** It's okay to use a book or books as a conversation starter, but don't just give your kid a book and never follow up. That can leave them more confused and, again, also sends the message that you don't want to talk about this.
- **Don't depend on the schools or your doctor.** Even if you are lucky enough to live somewhere that offers comprehensive sex education, you're still not off the hook. Schools usually focus on mechanics, disease, and reproduction and rarely address consent or relationships. Your family doctor doesn't have time at a regular appointment; there's too much to cover. And they may not be up on the most current contraceptive technology, what's 'normal' for kids these days, STI trends, etc. Your doc probably also assumes that you or the school has handled the basics.
- **Don't assume you don't need to talk to your sons.** Cisgendered guys tend to get the short end of the stick on sex ed, because 1) there are no menstruation logistics to deal with to force the issue; 2) typically the same-gender parent does the talking on this subject – and in dude+lady-parent families, usually it's Mom who talks about tough stuff; and 3) boys are less likely to get educated through reproductive health care because they don't have an annual exam. This is especially unfortunate because men are at particular risk for testicular cancer when they're young. Make a point of talking to your sons! They need to know about body changes, masturbation, wet dreams, what consent is, what's going on in the weird world of girls...

What to do to prepare

Think about your own values, opinions, and feelings about sex and sexuality. What counts as "sex" to you? What does being "ready" to have sex mean to you? Do you think it has to occur in a committed relationship? How are you going to talk about queerness, trans* issues, and fluidity in sexual orientation and gender identity? What do you want to say about how boys/men and girls/women might be different? How are you going to talk about reproduction without being heteronormative? Think these things through beforehand so you know what you want to say.

If you co-parent, get on the same page. Talk about these things with your partner. Present a united front where possible, and where you disagree, be clear that each of y'all have good reasons for what you think and that respectful disagreement is okay.

Educate yourself. Read up on current contraceptive and STI prevention methods. Look into and think about how your kids' lives are different from yours at the same age and the consequences that has. Check with your local Planned Parenthood – many of them have education staff that offer seminars on how to talk to your kids about sex as well as sex ed classes for teens.

Get backup. It is normal and healthy to feel a little weird about this! Keeping good boundaries is important. You don't want to hear the details? That's fine. Make sure your kids have other trusted adults they can go to – your best friend, your sibling/s, a clergy member, whomever.

Breathe. The far right thinks sex is terrifying and they have done a good job scaring the media. Even the left can fall into the trap of motivation by fear, especially when we talk about teen pregnancy. Calm down. Remember that sexual exploration is a natural, normal, and healthy part of human development, and also that we all did dumb stuff as kids and survived.

What to do

Start early. The more you practice, the easier this will get. And the more 'normal' it feels to your kid to talk about sex issues, the healthier s/he will be later.

Use real and accurate names for parts. These words aren't bad! They're just body parts. Words are for communication, so make sure your kid can accurately communicate. Sex educator pet peeve: don't refer to all female genitalia as the vagina. The vagina is just the tube leading inward. The bits on the outside are the vulva.

Use teachable moments. When kids ask questions about their gay cousin or pregnant neighbor, don't just offer monosyllabic answers. Let the questions guide you and open up conversation.

Emphasize autonomy and consent. Kids need to know their bodies belong to them and (with obvious exceptions for health-related touches from parents and doctors) they get to decide who has access to them. The "good touch, bad touch" conversation can lay the groundwork for self-protection and boundary setting as a young adult and beyond.

Be age-appropriate. Very young children do not want or need to know about vibrators or sexual fulfillment; they get overwhelmed when given too much information or things for which they have no context. Teenagers do not want you to tell them about their hoo-hoo, but they might want to talk at length about whether and when to have kids or how to deal with peer pressure to have sex. Pay attention to your kid's nonverbal cues and adjust accordingly.

Shut up sometimes. Remember that it's a conversation, not a lecture series. Listen. Let them talk. Ask clarifying questions of your own, like "This is what I heard, is that what you meant," "What do you already know about that," or "What do you think about that?" Check their understanding and let them know you're ready for more – "Does that answer your question? Is there anything else you want to know about this?" Try to understand where they're coming from. Listening and responding thoughtfully builds trust and comfort between you.

Acknowledge the awkwardness. It's okay if it feels awkward. That's normal. Saying something like, "I know this feels a little uncomfortable, but I love you and want you to be happy and healthy, so we need to be able to talk with each other about important things like this," can break the tension a little and get you past those moments of weirdness.

Offer resources for exploration on their own. It's okay if you don't know the answer to a question. Own up to it and offer to help them find out what they want to know. If they don't want help, point them to trustworthy, accurate resources like Planned Parenthood, Scarleteen.com, etc.

Pat yourself on the back! Kids who have strong relationships with their parents, including good communication about sex, are healthier and less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Talking about sex with your kids might be tough, but you're doing the right thing.