

It's Spring! Time to talk about the Birds and the Bees!



When most parents think about talking to their children about “the birds and the bees,” they tend to refer to it as “*the talk*.” It seems to be a topic of conversation dreaded by most parents and even more so by their children, depending on how late their parents have waited to have *the talk*. I’ve had countless people tell me that their parent(s) attempted to broach this subject with them the night before their wedding. I cannot speak for all people everywhere, but I’m willing to take a leap here in saying that in the United States, in the year 2012...this may be a tad too late. How and when to talk to children about S-E-X is something that I could write about for days! While this forum doesn’t offer me the opportunity to cover every aspect of it, I’m happy to try to cover some of the broad strokes, and offer direction to those who seek it.

Keep it simple

The key to effective teaching is to make sure that the information you are trying to impart is age and development appropriate, discussed repeatedly, and comes from someone who is well informed (so as to not give incorrect information). I heard a story once that I believe is helpful in illustrating this point:

A woman’s 4-year-old daughter came home one day asking her mother, “Where did I come from?” Her mother panicked, as she didn’t think she would have to answer this question so soon. To compose herself, she took several deep breaths and then sat her child down for *the talk*. She had rehearsed this in her head, but was taken off guard by how young her child was to be asking the question. Despite this, she began explaining that mommies have eggs and daddies have sperm, and when they are in love, they have a very special hug and mix them together and this makes a baby. Her voice became increasingly shaky and her words became more and more hurried, as she feared the additional questions to follow. After several minutes of talking to her daughter about biology and human creation, she could see that her daughter looked more confused than she had initially...and now a bit frightened. Trying to buy herself more time, she asked her daughter if they could finish the conversation after dinner that night. Her daughter responded with, “Um...I guess. It’s just that we had a new girl start today and she said she was from a place called Iowa. Then she asked me where I was from and I couldn’t remember.” The two now sat looking at each other blankly...

The story above is a great example of when a parent can give too much information (affectionately referred to as “TMI” by our children). The first thing a parent needs to do when asked a question about sex or sexuality is find out what the child already knows, and find out what they are trying to learn more about. In the above example, the mother could have asked her child more questions upfront, to find out more about what it was she wanted to know. Asking questions can give parents a solid road map for what the child *thinks* they know, and what kind of information they are seeking.

Developmentally Appropriate Conversations

Humans are sexual beings from birth until death. In deciding what information is appropriate to discuss you’re your child, it is important to consider where they are developmentally, and then tailor the discussion to focus on what they may need to know, for their age. For our purposes here, let’s briefly discuss some of the developmental milestones related to child sexuality. From **birth to age 2**, children are exploring their body parts, including genitals. They are beginning to understand male or female identity, and expected behaviors for boys and girls. Between **ages 3 and 4**, children become very curious about their bodies and gender and body differences of those around them. They may begin masturbating unless they are taught not to, they begin to have a more firm understanding of their gender, they may explore various forms of play with friends or siblings that explore the body (i.e.- playing doctor), and tend to start having fun with bathroom humor. Between the **ages of 5 to 8**, children are very curious about pregnancy and birth, have stronger same-sex friendships, display basic sexual orientation, begin to try to conform to their peer group’s style of dress and hobbies, and have a new awareness of authority figures. Between the **ages of 9 and 10** children may begin to enter puberty. [Note: Females tend to enter into puberty before males]. During this age, children start desiring more privacy while changing clothes and bathing, they start to develop “crushes” on friends, music idols, teachers, or counselors, can masturbate to orgasm, and may begin facing decisions about sex and drugs.

While the aforementioned developmental stages give some general parameters, different children may mature at faster or slower rates and this must be taken into consideration when trying to figure out what is appropriate for your child. Because of the ongoing development of sexuality, we need to have age appropriate conversations with our children throughout their childhood/adolescence. We can’t expect to have *the talk* once, and expect them to retain all of the information given. Children have several sources of education when it comes to learning about their sexuality: peers, school, caregivers, media, etc. It is extremely important that your children view you as more of an “expert” than their friends, media, etc., or they will defer to those sources for information (which may not share your values). When parents are the primary educators about sex and sexuality, they are the ones that can set the tone for instilling their values and help children learn information that will empower them to make healthy decisions. Moreover, if a child views their parent as comfortable talking about sex and sexuality, they are more likely to go to them and share information that could keep them from being harmed.

Current statistics show that one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused by the age of 18. In many of the cases of sexual abuse that I’ve treated, the victims have frequently said something like, “We didn’t talk about sex in my house. It was taboo...I didn’t know who I could talk to about what was happening to me.” Our children need to know that what is happening to them is wrong, it is not their fault, and that their parents will protect them. Knowledge is power. It may sound cliché, but it is true.

General Guidelines:

- Make sure that you have conversations early about “good touch” and “bad touch.”
- Tailor the information to the child’s level of development. When talking with young children, use simple language.
- Have open and honest conversations early to promote positive sexual attitudes and reduce feelings of shame.
- Have multiple conversations, adding depth and detail to the subject matter as the child develops and matures.
- If your child asks you a question, explore the child’s question, *before* you try to answer it.
- After a conversation, explore the child’s understanding of what you have just tried to teach them.
- Avoid talking about sex and sexuality in potentially shaming ways (i.e. - “sex is dirty”).
- Approach sexuality proactively instead of reactively. Don’t wait for them to learn it from their friends—chances are, they don’t have the correct information.
- When parents are the sexuality educators, they have some control over instilling shared family values related to sexuality.

Want more help?

There are plenty of resources out there for parents to help them teach their children about sex and sexuality at developmentally appropriate stages. One book that I have found to be particularly useful is “**What’s the Big Secret? Talking About Sex with Girls and Boys**” by L. Brown and M. Brown. It is appropriate for young children, and as a parent you can decide where you would like to start and stop, depending on what information you think your child needs. Using books as teaching aids can also help you, if you are feeling uneasy or embarrassed to have these conversations. If you have an older child, teenager, or adolescent, an excellent resource is: “**What Your Kids Need to Hear From YOU About Sex: The Talk**” by S. Maxwell. It is a comprehensive guide to helping parents talk to their kids about sex, sexual attitudes, self-discipline, sexual ethics & religion, and the internet—just to name a few.

There are many, many books out there to help parents have open and honest conversations with their children about sexual development, relationships, peer pressure, etc. For more parent resources on these and other topics, please visit my website:

www.SexTherapyInDelaware.com

❁ Happy Spring everyone! ❁

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