



Teen Pregnancy & Prevention Partnership

An Age Appropriate Guide to Sexuality Education for Parents

Small Children

Tips for Parenting Infants

This is the perfect time to start talking to your baby about anatomy. If you only talk about heads, shoulders, knees and toes, very important parts – and opportunities – are missed. As you change your baby’s diaper, say things like, “Here’s your nose, here’s your elbow, here’s your penis or vagina, here’s your knee and here are your toes!” This gives you an opportunity to practice naming body parts you may not be comfortable naming – or that no one named for you as a child. If you start now, you are paving the way for open communication in the future. You are giving your child the ability to talk about sex while they grow up. You are also sending a very important message to your child, “You can talk to me about sexuality.” Remember, if you don’t educate your kids about sex, someone else will.

Tips for Parenting Toddlers

As you bathe and potty train your toddler begin (or continue) to teach them accurate names for all body parts. If you can avoid names for body parts like “Wee wee” or “Down there” you are giving your child the great gift of comfort with sexuality. Kids catch on right away when parents are embarrassed about something. Take a deep breath if you have to but use the right words such as: penis, testicles, vulva, vagina, clitoris, bum and nipples. You can be honest and say, “When I was little, my mommy called this a ditty wa wa, but it’s real name is a vagina.”

At this stage children start to touch themselves. They discover it feels good to touch their own genitals. They may rub a book or a blanket against themselves. This will not hurt your child. It will not diminish their ability to give or receive pleasure as an adult. It is your job, however, to explain that this is normal and is something we do in private, not in a public place.

Oh, and one more thing. If your toddler should happen to toddle in when you are making love, the first thing you should do is smile! Don’t scream as it will scare them, perhaps even more than they’re already scared. Often a child will interpret what is going on as hurting you. Reassure them you are all right, send them back to bed, and if they need an explanation you can say something like, “Sometimes grown-ups play differently than kids do. It is a private thing and we are both safe.”

Preschool

Discovering your child and a friend playing “doctor” is likely to happen around this time. Try to be as calm as you can and redirect them. Shouting, “Oh my God! Put your clothes back on right this minute!” is likely to prompt them to explore this secret thing more later. Far more learning will occur from you saying something like, “Doctors have very special jobs that make it necessary for them to be able to examine our bodies. Unless you are at a real doctor’s office it is important to keep your private parts covered. Body parts that a bathing suit covers are private. How about getting dressed and helping me walk the dog / bake cookies / etc.” This is a good time to discuss your family rules and values in terms of appropriate touch, privacy and body exposure.

At this stage children are also beginning to learn about boundaries, what is and not appropriate when touching or being touched by other people. This is an important concept of teaching consent, explaining that a child should ask before touching someone else and people should ask before touching them. Also, explain to your child that no one should ever ask or try to



Teen Pregnancy & Prevention Partnership

touch their genitals. It's important for you to tell your child that they can tell you about inappropriate actions any time, even if they are told to keep it a secret.

In addition, a child may begin asking questions about how babies are made. You can address this topic by using books such as *What Makes a Baby* by Cory Silverberg as an easy method to explain the process. The amount of details you share with your child depends on their level of comprehension. Another method of explaining how babies are made is by sharing your child's personal birth story, allowing you to tailor the details to your family's specific situation. Also, it's important to introduce the different types of families and relationships.

Continue to use correct words for body parts and inclusive language with your child. Terminology gives your child a powerful tool in the event he or she is sexually abused and teaches your child that gender is not binary.

School-Aged

School-Aged Children

Now it is time to get a book or two. Hopefully, you are reading bedtime stories to your child and can add these to your stack from the library. There are many age appropriate books available. Read them together so you can answer questions. This sets the stage for them to be able to come to you later.

At this age kids will start to hear things from friends and older siblings. Don't let misinformation from a friend be the only source of your child's sexual knowledge.

Today, kids have more access to technology so it's important to start discussing how to explore digital spaces safely. Specifically, establishing rules around talking to strangers, sharing photos online and what to do when your child stumbles across something that makes them feel uncomfortable.

In addition, you may begin introducing the topic of sex with your child at this stage. Depending on your child's comprehension level, you can introduce this information early if you believe your child is ready. Talking about sex may also lead into the topic of puberty, where you can discuss how bodies change as your child grows. Children with vaginas are expected to start puberty between the ages of 9 and 11 with breast development being an indicator of change. Children with penises are expected to start puberty around the age of 10 with the growth of pubic hair being an indicator of change. Conversations about puberty should be an ongoing process throughout your child's development.

Lastly, you may explore the basics of sexual abuse more with your child. Specifically, telling your child no one should touch them without their permission. Kids at this age should begin learning about gender expression such as having conversations about an individual's genitals not determining their gender. Also, conversations about masturbation should continue, exploring privacy and proper hygiene.



Teen Pregnancy & Prevention Partnership

Preteens

Kids Approaching Puberty (9-12)

Your child may begin experiencing a lot of changes with their body, changes they may not understand, and this feeling can be overwhelming. Their bodies are going through physical, emotional and social changes. This is a good time to start talking about sexism, sexualization and body image. You can guide conversations by using examples found in media or your community. For example, you can discuss how women are expected to know how to cook and clean compared to the expectation that men are supposed to work and take care of their family. Don't forget to talk about the positive changes and progress being made, such as more women working in the STEM fields. This allows your child to find power and positivity in people who have overcome stereotypes.

In addition, due to the physical, emotional and social changes your child is going through at this stage, they may struggle with body issues. It's important to check in with your child and talk about their feelings and thoughts they may have about their body. Make sure your child knows the changes that are happening to their body are normal.

Also, you may want to introduce the topic of sexual choices and safe sex. Specifically, exploring different functions and types of contraceptive methods such as; pills, implants, intrauterine devices (IUDs), condoms, shots and the patch. This allows your child to make better choices and have the resources they need to practice safe sex.

At this age, your child generally has more freedom online, this is a good time to revisit internet safety and establish digital rules and values. For example, you can discuss the consequences of sharing nude photos of themselves or their peers online. Also, you can have conversations with your child about online bullying using stories shared in the media or from peers to guide the conversation.

There's a chance your child will likely ask questions you cannot answer. This is a great time to demonstrate for them how you find accurate information. Go to the library, bookstore, or online together to find and explore more information about your child's sexuality. If you do not know the answer to your child's question, you can always say, "That's a great question! Let me see if I can find the answer and get back to you. I'd like to know that too."



Teen Pregnancy & Prevention Partnership

Teenagers

Teens

If you haven't started the process of talking to your teen about sexuality, spend a little time watching TV with them. It will give you all sorts of opportunities to discuss sexuality and your values about it. If either of you are not comfortable talking about the topic, the car is a great place to start. You don't have to make eye-contact and no one can leave the room. Remember, this is an ongoing process, not a one-time talk. It is your job to bring it up again and again.

They need to know your values. If you don't want your child to have sex until they are married, tell them so. If you don't want your child to have sex until they are in a committed, long-term relationship and are at least 18, share this with them. If you want them to use a condom, tell them that as well. You may have to practice saying this, but, I promise it will not make your kids go out and have sex. Say it. "I do not want you to have sex yet, but I want you to use a condom if you do."

They also need to know what you DO think is OK for them to do. Is it OK for them to kiss? Hug? Cuddle? Touch above the waist? Below? If you have been talking to them comfortably since they were infants, this will not be so hard to do. If this is new, start by asking them what they think and practice active listening. Keep the conversations short at first to build comfort and trust for longer conversations. Teens can and should start making decisions for themselves, but making healthy decisions takes guidance. Try to build up their decision-making skills instead of shaming them for their opinions or decisions.

Teens may try other sexual activities, such as oral sex, rather than vaginal intercourse. As a culture we have told them not to have sex while bombarding them with all sorts of sexual ads, TV programs, music, etc. We have said don't have sex so you don't create a pregnancy or get a sexually transmitted infection (STI). Some figure it is "safe" to have oral sex. They need to hear from you that they can get an STI from oral sex (no matter who performs it on whom). Also, this may be a good time to supply your child with condoms and teach them how to properly apply and take off a condom. You may also want to revisit the topic of contraception and discuss scheduling a doctor's appointment for your child to talk privately with a physician about reproductive health, including birth control and STI testing.

In addition, it's important to revisit the topic of consent in sexual relationships and continue having frequent conversations around this topic with your child. Specifically, thinking about how you can help them protect themselves from peer pressure and dating violence. Also, you may want to have frequent conversations about healthy relationships by exploring your child's personal relationships if they're comfortable talking about it or sharing stories from your past relationships.

For more information about age appropriate topics to guide conversations around sexuality, visit the link below:

<https://www.todayparent.com/family/parenting/age-by-age-guide-to-talking-to-kids-about-sex/>