

Talking About Sexuality

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TALKING ABOUT SEXUALITY

(One to Two Hour Session)

Program Description

The goal of sexuality education is to provide children with all the information needed to make responsible decisions for themselves as they mature and develop their own independence and healthy sexual attitudes.

As parents, we do not have a choice as to whether our children receive an education in sexuality. That is already taking place in their lives via television, advertising, radio, peers, etc. The only choice we have is whether or not to participate in their sexual education.

Frequently, parents are faced with examining their own attitudes, feelings, values and biases about sexuality when the issue arises in their own home. Such critical self-examination is crucial if parents are to be approachable and askable about sexuality. Teaching our children provides us with a wonderful opportunity to impart our values on this important topic to our children. These values must be accompanied by factual information on sexuality.

Program Objectives:

1. To understand the role of parents as primary educators for sexuality in the family.
2. To develop skills for open and trusting parent/child communication of sexuality within the value of moral convictions of the family.
3. To understand sexuality as a natural part of being human.

Intended Audience

Parents with young children up to 10 years.

Materials needed:

- Handouts
- Index cards and pens
- Lesson outline
- List with names of messengers'
- Marble box and marbles

- White board or flip-chart, easel and marker

Topics and Time Frame

Introduction	5 minutes
Sexual Development through Childhood.....	15 minutes
Discussion with Questions.....	25 minutes
Break.....	15 minutes
Activities - Choose According to Time and Group.....	25 minutes
Summary.....	5 minutes
Evaluation.....	5 minutes

Introductions and Personal Identity.

Introduce yourself and then have participants introduce themselves. Ask them to give name, what brought them to this group and tell of a favorite childhood memory.

Key Concepts of Lesson

Sexual Development Through Childhood (overview)

Each person is socialized differently. Values learned as a child may influence the values that are passed on to each generation. The topic of sexuality can be a topic that is uncomfortable and considered private. However, parents will inevitably have to address not only their own sexuality but how they will relate to their child's emergency sexuality.

Sexuality begins to form from birth and messages we received that will influence later choices, a child's sense of right and wrong, self-esteem and many other aspects that relate to the development of sexuality. *(Show overhead I with statistics on sexuality.)*

Ages Five to Eight

Children in this age group have moved into the world beyond home and have begun to find their place in it. They realize they are starting to be judged on their own rather than their family merits. They begin to reorganize the way they see themselves and the way they behave to adapt to new social situations. Children bring varying levels of knowledge and skill to this period of life depending on their family and preschool experiences.

Children at this age may:

- Play out different sex roles.
- Be very curious about pregnancy and birth.
- Have strong same-sex friendships. Girls and boys learn different styles of communicating. Girls tend to form close intimate friendships with one or two other girls. Boys usually play in larger groups; their play is rougher and more oriented around mutual interests in activities (Maccoby, 1990).
- Show strong interest in male/female roles that are often stereotyped, regardless of parents' approach to childrearing.
- Have a basic sexual orientation by this time.
- Have a new awareness of authority figures teachers may be seen as knowing more than parents.
- Compare their own situations with those of peers; complain about lack of fairness.
- Begin to conform with peer group style of dress and speech. At this age boys experience more pressure than girls to adhere to sex-role expectations in areas such as choice of toys, hobbies, clothing and hair styles.
- Engage in name-calling and teasing.

Ages Nine to Twelve

For many children, especially girls, fourth or fifth grade marks the onset of puberty. At this age, children are intensely curious, constantly teasing and interested in everything. At the early end of this stage, they approach sexuality information in a direct and scientific manner. However, since girls tend to mature faster than boys, they often seem to feel more nervous and to act more secretively during discussions about puberty, probably because the whole topic is closer to them at this time than it is for boys.

Most children are very interested in music, clothes and all that it takes to be "cool." Some even have a "boyfriend" or girlfriend" who they see at school and talk to on the phone.

Children at this age may:

- Enter puberty, especially girls. Early pubertal development is perceived positively by most boys but negatively by many girls.
- Become more modest and desire privacy.
- Experience emotional ups and downs.
- Develop romantic crushes on friends, older teens, music and TV idols, or sometimes teachers and counselors.
- Continue to attach importance to same sex friends.
- Feel awkward and wonder "Am I normal?"
- Be strongly influenced by peer group, but parents remain the major source of values.
- Continue to learn society's expectations about appropriate behavior for boys and girls. Girls, more than boys, experience increased pressure to conform to stereotyped sex roles. They may avoid academic achievement, for example, preferring to base their popularity on appearance, personality or possessions.
- Begin to penetrate mysteries of the adult world by using sexual language and enjoying romantic and sexual fantasies.
- Face decisions about sex and drugs.

From: *When Sex is the Subject*, Pamela Wilson, Network Publications, 1991.

Discussion and Questions:

For many of us, talking about sexuality in a group situation is a new experience. It is normal to feel a little uncomfortable and ill at ease. We probably all have different values and beliefs regarding sexuality. That's okay. We don't need to agree. We just need to respect one another and not be judgmental, in order to gain an understanding of the importance of discussing this topic with one's own child.

Can use marble box teaching technique to ask questions or if group is comfortable enough, just use questions. If you use this technique, ask questions for yes or no answers.

Marble Box - A method to survey group and not single out a person. Have a small box (e.g.: cigar box) and put another smaller box inside and glue in place. Buy about 10 different colors of marbles or beads (they're cheaper) and have enough of each color for about the number of people in the group.

Steps:

- Ask the question you would like to have the answer to.
e.g.: I believe it is OK to have children before you are out of high school.
Ask group to vote: Yes - blue marble, No - red marble
- Pass the box to a person.
- They look in box, choose a marble from the larger box and drop in the smaller box and pass on to the next person. Can be passed under chin if they feel necessary.
- When it has been passed to everyone and they have voted by using the marbles - Open the box to count marbles and get the result.

No one ever knows how the other person voted. Once you use it in a group a few times, they will be wanting to ask questions of the group and yet not disclose personal feelings, actions, etc.

This is an excellent time to talk about results, make a point or teach a lesson, etc. If you have a local, county, state, national figures present, they can use this opportunity to understand community perceptions compared to local and state demographics.

1. Use the following questions as discussion starter for parents on this topic:

- Was sexuality a comfortable, open area of communication in your family as you were growing up?

- How old were you when your parents began talking to you about sexual relationships and behaviors? What kind of information did they give you?
- What attitudes did your parents pass on to you regarding sexuality either through communication or actions?
- Did your parents openly display affection with one another?
- Did you sense your parents were uncomfortable talking to you about sex?
- Do you feel your parents gave you adequate information in preparation for dating?
- Were your parents clear in communicating their values on sexuality?

ASK: What do many of these messages mean? Even if sexuality was never discussed in your home, that was a very powerful message. What was the message?

2. Ask participants to discuss why sexuality might be a difficult subject for some parents to discuss with their children. Some conclusions might be:

- Discussion of sexuality by their parents was not role-modeled as a comfortable topic to discuss.
- Some parents fear they may be instilling "ideas" or curiosity into their child by discussing the topic.
- Parents may fear that merely by discussing the topic, a child may interpret it as "permission" to engage in sexual activity.
- Parents may fear not having the correct information themselves and do not want to perpetuate "myths" they learned.
- Parents may not know at what "age" to discuss the subject or what is age-appropriate for the discussion.
- Parents may be afraid of being asked "personal" questions.

Activity 1

- Choose number to suit your group -- Divide into groups of 3 or 5. Give each group a separate question to address.)

The message of the media all too often place an unhealthy connotation on sex/sexuality. It is our task, as parents, to convey healthy attitudes to our children, attitudes that reflect the values and beliefs of our families.

1. In small groups, have parents brainstorm messages they, as parents, hope to convey to their children about sexuality. (Emphasizing that we do not all have to agree with each of the messages raised, due to individual values.) Examples might include:

- Relationships
- Total personhood
- Communication
- Intimacy

- Feeling
- Honesty

ASK: What are some messages our children are receiving from the media? Do you see any similarities in these media messages and the messages we brainstormed that we, as parents, hope to convey? What might the benefits be of a parent educating their child on this topic, rather than leaving it up to the schools, media, peers, culture, etc.?

It is critical that we help our children distinguish the difference between the media/external interpretation of sexuality and what we, as parents, want our children to believe and understand. At the same time, we must also help them see the responsibilities and risks involved in regard to their own sexuality.

2. Ask the group what they feel might be the risks of failing to educate our children about sexuality? Can we afford to take this risk? (*After brainstorming, share "Current Statistics" - see overhead I.*)
3. Have participants discuss ways to initiate conversation on this topic with their child. (Refer to handout on "Ways to Initiate Conversation with Children Regarding Sexuality".)
4. Discuss GUIDELINES for talking to your child about sexuality. (Refer to handout on "How to be an Askable, Approachable Parent".)

ACTIVITY 2

Provide each parent with an index card. Have them write down three questions that they might struggle with if their child were to ask them these questions. Collect the questions and divide the participants into pairs. Read some of the questions and have the parents role-play how they might respond to these questions with their child.

Some examples may include:

- Where do babies come from?
- What is this? (when they find a condom in your nightstand drawer).

ACTIVITY 3

Read Elkind's excerpt from *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, by David Elkind as a lead in to this activity.

Here goes. I sit on the edge of the chair opposite him, "Dad?"

He looks up real nice and says, "Yes son?" like I'm about to ask him if he wants another dish of ice cream. I look at the floor. "Dad, can you tell me about, uh, sex?"

He zaps off the TV and swivels his rocker toward me all concerned. "What's the matter, John? Are you in trouble or something?"

"Trouble? No, Dad. I'm not in any trouble." I look up at him. "I'm in confusion. No body at school seems to know what's going on and a lot of crazy stories are going around. I thought you could..."

"Oh . . . I see. You want to know about . . . sex?" I nod.

"That's terrific, son. Just between you and me, right? Man to man, father to son. You know my father never talked to me about . . . that kind of stuff. Okay, let's see now . . ."

Finally some answers. I told you he wouldn't laugh.

Dad leans forward and so do I. We're eye to eye, man to man.

"Son, it's like this," says Dad, shifting in his seat. "Men have, uh, their own baseball bats."

He frowns for a second and tries again. "No, no, that's not it." He continues, "Um, girls have catcher's mitts and boys have a, well, no . . ."

Poor Dad is wiggling like crazy in his easy chair. He keeps glancing back at the blank TV screen. We are no longer eye to eye.

"Am I helping you son?"

"Not really. It's just that,"

He interrupts. "Okay, let's do this, John. There's first base, second base and."

"No, Dad. I mean, what about all those changes that are going on in my body and everything?"

"Changes?" That word makes him more uncomfortable than sex did.

He picks up the remote control. "Son, men just know these things. That's all, they just know. It'll come to you. You'll see. Don't worry about anything. Now I'm gonna watch my game."

Go around the room and divide the group into different categories to represent people giving messages about sexuality.

- Doctor
- Parents
- Boy/Girl Friends
- Pastor
- Teacher
- School Mates

- Media
- Other

Ask each person to go around the room in 1 large group saying what message they would say to a friend about having sex, from the viewpoint of the person or group they represent. Have everyone give message at same time, or divide group by teams and have each one give the message.

Ask group how they felt about this exercise. Talk about mixed messages and how teens today get so many messages they have to learn (right from wrong) and figure out what's best for them and to learn to make a decision and take a stand. Everyone giving the message thinks theirs is right.

SUMMARY:

When it comes to teaching sexuality to our children, we really don't have a choice. We must become their number one influence on their beliefs and values regarding sexuality. Opening the lines of communication is usually the biggest hurdle. Primary to this, however, we must continually reinforce our love to our children and clarify our own beliefs and values regarding sexuality and how we are going to convey these concepts to our children.

It is important to remember that sexual responsibility is a multi-dimensional process. Self-esteem, problem-solving skills, coping with peer pressure, and our ability to set limits all play a role in our children's ability to make responsible decisions regarding their sexuality and their ability to feel comfortable about their sexuality as they grow as a human being.

TALKING ABOUT SEXUALITY

(Evaluation Sheet)

We are interested in how worthwhile your involvement in the workshop on "Sex Education" has been. Completing this form will only take a few minutes. Please be brief, to-the-point, and honest. Your name is not required.

Date of program: _____

County: _____

Age:

Childrearing Status:

5. How do you plan on using what you learned?

6. Overall, how would you rate this program (circle one): A B C D E

(Rating scale: A is Great E not good.)

References and Resources

Where Did I Come From? video, 27 minutes, 1980's; using cartoons and a script adapted from Peter Mayle's book, the video presents a humorous but factual look at the facts of life for children aged 6-11; parental support recommended.

Sex: A Topic for Conversation for Parents and Teenagers (with Dr. Sol Gordon) - Video, 40 minutes, 1989; program designed to help parents, teachers and teens feel comfortable talking about sex, sexuality and the consequences of premature sexual behavior.

Sex: A Topic for Conversation for Parents of Young Children (with Dr. Sol Gordon) - video, 30 minutes, 1989; informative discussion to help parents feel more comfortable in their role as sex educators; emphasis on the "teachable moment" and "askable parents".

Miscellaneous Tips

Look through information, questions and handouts to pick what is suited for your audience and time frame.

Handouts:

(for lesson discussion and extract support materials)

WAYS TO INITIATE CONVERSATION WITH CHILDREN

Regarding Sexuality:

- Watch for "teachable moments" in daily life: don't wait for the "perfect" time.
- Welcome questions. Give accurate information. Try not to act embarrassed or overreact.
- Respond to questions about sexuality in a matter-of-fact manner, the way you would talk about any other topic.
- Try to answer what's being asked, not what you think is being asked.
- Encourage openness by making time for private moments together.
- Use TV as a springboard; balance TV messages with your own thoughts and values.
- Share your own childhood experiences.
- Listen to the lyrics of "their" music and respond in a nonjudgmental way. Ask, "What do you think about that?"
- Tell your children that your parents were uncomfortable talking to you about sexuality (or "about this kind of stuff") and that you don't want this to be uncomfortable for either of you.
- Use open-ended questions": "What would you do if . . . ?"



HOW TO BE AN ASKABLE, APPROACHABLE PARENT

- Get your facts straight.
- Begin early. Use the anatomically correct words of genitals.
- Answer their questions honestly. If you don't have enough information, tell him/her that you need to find the answer.
- Don't put off the questions.
- Respect your child's privacy.
- Role modeling is powerful. Show love and care in your own relationships.
- Show your children that they are unconditionally loved and accepted. Continue giving them hugs and kisses when tucking them in at night.

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CURRENT STATISTICS ON SEXUALITY

- The U.S. has the highest rate of adolescent pregnancy among developed nations of the world.
- Only one-third of adolescents engaging in intercourse use any form of birth control.
- One million teenagers become pregnant each year.
- The highest rate of increase in sexually transmitted diseases is among the adolescent age group.
- Most adolescent intercourse takes place in the home.
- One out of every 10 adolescent girls become pregnant before age 20.

HANDOUT #1

SEXUALITY EDUCATION **How To Be An Askable, Approachable Parent** *Mary O'Brien*

- Get your own facts straight. Check out references; you may even wish to purchase a book or pamphlet with accurate information about reproduction, contraception and other sexuality issues. You and your spouse/significant other may need to discuss your feelings on these topics and how you jointly plan to handle them in your home. In the best of all worlds, children should be hearing about this issue from both parents.
- Begin early. Treat sex as a natural function, from day one. Continue using the anatomically correct words for genitals.
- Answer your child's questions honestly. If you don't have enough information, let your child know you need to find the answer; perhaps she/he can even search for it with you.
- Sexuality education is on-going. It is not accomplished in The Big Talk. It should be a lifelong process, where information is shared gradually and bit by bit.
- Watch for teachable moments. Besides picking up on the cues and questions your child provides, try to take advantage of the many natural opportunities to discuss sex.
- Praise the question and the questioner; don't put off the questioner. You may want to ask the child why he or she wants to know. Remember that the bulk of their questions in early elementary are fueled by natural curiosity. As children move into middle school, curiosity is mixed with the stirrings of puberty. The information takes on a new significance. Be certain to include discussions of emotions and values.
- Make sure you understand what your child is asking. The lowest level of information is usually the safest response to any question. Should that not be satisfactory, your child will let you know she/he needs more information. At the same time, give age appropriate information but neither over nor underestimate your children's knowledge base.
- Focus on the "Why" more than the "Do's and Don'ts." Especially for middle school aged children, they would like parents to explain their rationale for family values and attitudes. When children begin to challenge these values, try to stay calm. Ask them why they think the way they do in order to leave the door open for further discussions. Don't lecture!
- Let your children know when a particular topic is difficult for you to discuss and tell them why. Watch your body language.
- Respect your children's privacy. As they grow older, it is sometimes important for them to have another trusted adult they can talk to: teacher, counselor, aunt, uncle, etc.
- Help children develop and hone their problem solving skills. Point out that for many situations, there is more than one alternative. Help them look at their options and

- think about the possible results of each of their choices. Be very clear with them about how you would react to these choices and what the consequences would be.
- With early adolescents, re-confirm what family guidelines are. You may wish to include them in developing these as new situations arise. Let them know that if they even find themselves in an uncomfortable situation, all they have to do is call.
 - Don't push your early adolescent into any exclusive relationships with the opposite sex. Open your home to your children and their friends. Trust your children but don't always trust every situation they wish to become involved with.
 - Role modeling is powerful. Show care and love in your own relationships. Make your own decisions without succumbing to pressure.
 - Show your children they are unconditionally loved and accepted. Continue giving them hugs and kisses, tucking them in at night.

Handout 2

How Parents Can Help Keep Communication Open
(Handout)

When asked about their problems with parents, youth most often cite "not being listened to." Really listening is not always easy. Nor is communicating. Some of the following suggestions may help.

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Give your undivided attention when your child wants to talk to you. Don't read, watch TV, fall asleep, or make yourself busy with other tasks.

-

Try to listen calmly, even though there may be a difference of opinion. Concentrate on hearing and understanding your child's point of view. Don't start preaching when a give-and-take discussion is wanted.

-

Develop a courteous tone of voice in communication. Respect brings respect--even in the way we speak.

-

Avoid making judgments. Anyone avoids confiding in someone who is critical of his or her behavior. It is not necessary to approve all of your child's behavior, but it is important to understand the feelings involved.

-

Keep the door open on any subject. Too often children avoid discussing things that may make their parents feel uncomfortable. Belittling, humiliating, and laughing at youngsters can cause deep wounds and short circuit the lines of communication.

-

Permit expression of ideas and feelings. Just because their views and philosophies are different from yours does not mean that they feel certain about them. Often young people "test" their ideas in conversation. To communicate, you must be willing to listen first and acknowledge their opinions even if you are alarmed by them. Then give your viewpoints as

plainly and honestly as you can, recognizing that love and mutual respect can exist, even when points of view are different.

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Encourage positive self-worth. Help your youngster build confidence by encouraging (but not forcing) participation in sports, music, art, dance, or any other hobby or interest.

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Be aware of how you treat other children in the family. Do you show favoritism? This could make a child feel rejected, unloved, and jealous. Try to be fair and consistent. It will pay off.

-

Make an effort to say nice things. Too often parents tend to focus on poor performance and behavior. Every human being needs acceptance and appreciation.

-

Hold family conferences. Most youth feel they have little or no voice in family affairs. Family gatherings offer an excellent opportunity for children to participate in decision-making and to work things out together.

Extra Tips to Parents

In addition to improving communication, there are actions parents can take to help their children through the years.

Try to set a good example

Children learn by what they see. Too often people say one thing and do another. "Do as I say and not as I do," will not carry much weight.

Supervise and guide. Although children are capable of handling certain privileges and responsibilities, they still need help in setting limits on their freedom and behavior. Deciding **with** the child what these limits and policies are usually elicits more reasonable attitudes.

Communicate, in words and actions, what you expect of your children. Youngsters need the security of knowing where their parents stand and what parents expect of them.

Respect the child's desire for individuality and independence. Parents do, and should, attempt to influence their children, but this is quite different from trying to force them into preconceived molds to fit parents' desires. Parents can accept and respect their children as individuals without accepting all their ideas.

Take an interest in your children's activities and friends. Give the youngster time to be with their friends and make their friends welcome when they come to visit.

Try not to overreach. It is only natural for children to test their parents' authority while trying to assert themselves. At the same time, they are trying out their own competence. Parents must let their children make mistakes--and at the same time be ready to help when help is needed.

Source: *Plain Talk About Adolescence*, National Institute of Mental Health.

Personal Parenting Plan

(Use this as a way to self-evaluate and strengthening parenting skills.)

Things I Already Do Well Things I'm Going To Try Things I will Eliminate

Communicating Effectively with Children

Why take the time to communicate?

Children base their views of themselves and the world on their daily experiences. One of the most important experiences adults can provide for children is to talk with and listen to them. Through these daily interactions, children and adults can develop relationships that help children to learn about themselves and the world. Adults who care for children have a responsibility to create and maintain positive and healthy relationships with them. One of the most practical and mutually rewarding ways to achieve this goal is through positive communication.

Research suggests that the best parent-child relationships are characterized by lots of positive communication and interaction. Content parents and children communicate on a regular basis about many different things. They don't communicate only when there is a conflict. The researchers believe that when adults stay in touch with children through attention and conversation, children may be less likely to act out or behave in ways that create conflict or require discipline.

Effective communication with children requires communication styles and behavior appropriate to the age of the child. Understanding how children of different ages communicate and what they like to talk about is crucial for rewarding interaction with them. Adults must communicate in a way that relates to the age and interests of the child.

Communicating with children of different ages.

Infants: Birth to 12 months

Infants communicate with their coos, gurgles, and grunts, facial expressions, cries, body movements like cuddling or back arching, eye movements such as looking towards and looking away and arm and leg movements.

Encourage infant communication.

- Quickly respond to infant communication (e.g. comfort a crying baby; smile at a smiling infant; relax if a baby turns her head to the side)
- Provide meaning to infant's communicative efforts (e.g., "You are crying, I know it is time for your bottle; "You are smiling, you like it when I tickle your feet!")
- Use a sing-song, high-pitched tone of voice, exaggerated facial expressing and wide-opened eyes when interacting with young infants. These types of behavior capture infant's attention and help them to keep focused in interacting.

- Make the most of the times when you and an infant are facing each other (e.g., during diaper changes, feedings, mealtimes) and talk, sing or gently tickle the infant. Infants are fascinated by adult faces and love to look at them when they are close.
- Pay attention to an infant's style of expressing emotions, preferred levels of activity and tendency to be social. Some infants are quiet and observant and prefer infrequent adult interaction. Other infants are emotional, active and seek continuous adult attention and interaction. Recognizing the unique personality of each infant will make effective communication easier.

Toddlers: 12 to 36 months

Toddlers communicate with a combination of gestures and grunts, one word sentences, two word sentences, positive and negative emotional expressions and body movements.

- Respond quickly and predictably to toddlers' communicative efforts (e.g., "You are pointing at the fridge, is it time for some juice?" "Bah-bah, that means you want your blanket, doesn't it?")
- Expand on toddlers' one and two word communications and build sentences around their words (e.g., "Hot, that's right, the pizza is hot." "Blue, your pants are blue with white stripes, aren't they? "Do again? Okay, I'll push you some more on the swing.")
- Keep a word diary where you record toddlers' new words. The diary can be shared with other adults and the words can be used in conversation.
- Give toddlers one direction at a time and provide warnings before transitions (e.g., "We're going to leave for grandma's house in five minutes." Five minutes pass. "Okay, time to get ready, go get your coat from the bedroom." "Oh good, you got your coat, I'll help you put it on.")
- Label toddlers' emotions (e.g., "When you fall and get hurt, you feel sad." "Playing with your cousin Mary makes you happy!")
- Make the most of daily routines and talk toddlers through routines in the sequence in which they happen (e.g., "First we put warm water in the bathtub...then you take off your clothes and get in! Time to get the washcloth soapy and clean you up....first I'll wash your little toes....")
- During play with toddlers, follow their lead and let them create the play. Describe for toddlers what they are doing during play and let them create the play. Describe for toddlers what they are doing during play and let them have control (e.g., "Oh, you are driving the car up the sofa, now it is falling to the floor! Here comes the truck to take the car to the garage.")
- When telling older toddlers what you want, provide an explanation and tell the toddler WHY you want something to happen (e.g., "Janey, I told you to please pick up your blocks and put them away. I don't want anyone tripping and falling over them.")

Preschoolers: 3 to 6 years

Preschoolers begin to talk in full sentences that are grammatically correct.

Young preschoolers may struggle with telling stories in the correct order, but by age 6, sequencing the events of a story comes much more easily.

Preschoolers like to talk about their past experiences.

They experiment with pretend and fantasy play; sometimes preschoolers talk about imaginary experiences.

Children of this age begin to recognize the spoken word and the written word. They often recognize traffic signs (e.g., stop) and restaurant signs (e.g., McDonald's) without being told what they literally say.

Preschoolers often talk to themselves when playing and working on tasks such as puzzles or art activities.

Encourage preschoolers' communication

- Ask preschoolers questions about past events; probe for details and provide new words to enhance description of experiences (e.g., "Tell me who you played with at child care today? What did you do together?")
- Encourage preschoolers to talk about their feelings, both positive and negative, and discuss the possible causes for the emotions.
- Create opportunities for preschoolers to engage in fantasy and pretend play, either alone or with friends (e.g., pretend baby bathing, pretend housekeeping, pretend astronaut play).
- Provide opportunities for preschoolers to experience the connection between the spoken word and the written word (e.g., label familiar parts of the physical environment; have children tell you stories and write them down; allow children to 'write' their own stories or thank you notes; have children collect items from the environment which include words they can read, such as toothpaste tubes or cereal boxes).
- When preschoolers are talking to themselves, let them be. Self-talk helps preschoolers focus on what they are doing.

School-age: 6 to 12 years

School-age children talk much like adults - in full sentences. They ask more questions, can relate past experiences in vivid detail and seek more information and justification for the way things are.

They can understand and talk about the perspective of another person and are beginning to recognize the influence their behavior can have on others.

School-age children can handle more pieces of information at the same time and with assistance from adults, can effectively engage in goal setting and problem solving.

At this age, children spend more time talking and playing with peers and friends.

Encourage school-age communication

- Use conversation as a way to keep up with school-age children's activities, likes, dislikes and peer relationships. Peers are important at this stage and by talking with children regularly, adults can keep informed about school-age children's relationships with their age=mates.
- Use conversation to help school-age children set goals and solve problems ("if you have to go to Girl Scouts this afternoon, let's talk about when you can do your homework."). Take time to discuss strategies and solutions and have the school-age child talk about possible outcomes.
- When correcting the school-age child's behavior, provide a calm explanation for your preferences. By giving a reason, you help the school-age child understand the implications of his or her behavior for others (e.g., if your child teases another child because he or she wears glasses, explain that wearing glasses helps the child to see better and remind the child that teasing can hurt another's feelings).
- Encourage school-age children to learn conflict management skills. Because peer relationships are becoming more important at this age, conflicts between children will likely arise. Help children learn how to manage conflicts effectively while preserving the peer relationship. Act out pretend peer interactions with children and show how conflicts can be resolved, depending on how children handle the situation.

Adolescents: 12 to 18 years

Adolescents are interested in talking in depth about themselves and about their relationships with others. They want to understand who they are becoming and what others think and feel about them.

Adolescents want to talk about how they are different from their parents and the rest of the world. They are beginning to recognize that their parents are imperfect people.

Adolescence is a time when children typically act more negative and have more conflicts with their parents.

Adolescents spend more time alone and with their friends and less time with their families.

Encourage adolescent communication

- Be actively sensitive and responsive to the adolescent experience. Remember, each adolescent is going through major social and physical changes; practice putting yourself in the adolescent's place when you find yourself disagreeing or growing impatient.
- Use conversation as an opportunity to keep up with adolescent activities and relationships. Stay interested in the adolescent and gently ask questions and seek explanations for adolescent behavior.

- Although adolescents strive for independence and separation from the family, you can best maintain the relationship by providing a balance between expecting personal responsibility from the adolescent and offering consistent support.
- Be flexible. Seek to understand the adolescent perspective first before trying to be understood yourself. Maintaining the adult-child relationship is perhaps the most helpful thing that one can do for supporting the adolescent through these years.
- Recognize that the adolescent is developing ideas that may be different from your own. Unless these ideas place the adolescent in danger of harm to self or others, accept the adolescent's beliefs as an example of their developing individuality.

Make the most of a priceless good: COMMUNICATION

Few activities in life come with so great a reward as communicating effectively with one another. The ideas in this guide can help you develop healthy and mutually rewarding adult-child relationships. There is little doubt that the world can be overwhelming for children. By paying attention to and communicating regularly with children, you can help children create a view of themselves and the world that is positive and healthy.

Encourage family stories

All children love to hear and to tell stories. Adults can encourage children and parents to share their family stories. Storytelling is a universal way for families to pass down important history from generation to generation. From hearing family stories, children learn about their family identity and about the beliefs and expectations that make their family unique. These experiences encourage children to use their imagination and create visual images of relatives from long ago and far away. Storytelling also brings adults and children closer and creates a wonderful opportunity for intimacy and relationship building. Ask the children and families that you care about to share with you some of their stories. (Taken from: Stone, E. 1988. *Black sheep and kissing cousins: How our family stories shape us*. NY: Penguin Books.)

The power of the written word

Sometimes we get so busy with everyday life that we forget the simpler ways to communicate. In "Put Your Heart on Paper" (1995), Henriette Klauser encourages us to use the written word as a way of staying in touch. She says that writing can start communications that may be too difficult for the spoken word and can heal conflicts between adults and children. Most important is that these writings become part of the relationship's history.

Here are some ideas for how to use the written word in your relationships:

- On a small piece of paper, state a simple request such as "I'd like to take a walk with you," and leave the note in a visible place.

- If you are having trouble understanding a child, or making yourself understood, use writing as an opportunity for explanation.
- Journals can be used to document a relationship's history. Use the journal to record special events and time spent together.
- Leave small greetings for each other in unlikely places such as on the bathroom mirror or in a backpack.
- Share a journal with someone. Keep the journal in a place where each person can easily get to it and record feelings and experiences.

MU Extension,

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GH 6123

Resources:

From other Extension Services and other sources.

Talking to Your Child About Sex, Mary S. Caderone and James Ramey

Talk Sex (Answers to Questions You Can't Ask Your Parents), Sue Johnson

What's Happening to My Body? Book for Girls, Lynda Madaras

What's Happening to My Body? Book for Boys, Lynda Madaras

Life Blood - A New Image for Menstruation, Margaret Sheffield

Almost Grown Up - A Frank and Funny Guide to Puberty, Claire Patterson and Lindsay Quilter

Period, JoAnn Gardner-Loulan, Bonnie Lopez, and Marcia Quackenbush

Talking With Your Child About Sex: A guide for Parents, Channing L. Bete Co., Inc.

For Children:

The Bare Naked Book, Kathy Stinson

Outside-In, Clare Smallman and Edwina Riddell

Did the Sun Shine Before You Were Born?, Sol & Judith Gordon

Does AIDS Hurt? Educating Young Children About AIDS, M. Quackenbush and S. Villarreal

Girls Are Girls and Boys are Boys, Sol Gordon

Web Sites

[National Network for Health Bridge for Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting, and Sexuality](#)

[National PTA Talking with Kids about Sex](#)

Other Resources:

Advocates for Youth

1025 Vermont Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20005

(202) 347-5700

American Red Cross

AIDS Education Office

8111 Gate-house Road

Falls Church, VA 22042

<http://www.redcross.org>

Mothers' Voices

165 West 46th Street, Suite 701

New York, NY 10036

(888)MVOICES

<http://www.mvoices.org>

National AIDS Clearinghouse

PO Box 6003

Rockville, MD 20849-6003

(800) 458-5231

<http://www.cdcnac.org>

Planned Parenthood

(800) 230-7526

<http://www.igc.apc.org/ppfa/>

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the US

130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350

New York, NY 10036

(212) 819-9770

<http://www.siecus.org>

Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc.: For information about sexuality education programs in your community, or to make an appointment for counseling, services, or referral, call toll-free 800/230-PLAN. (Also includes information in Spanish.)

National Family Sexuality Education Month is every October: National Family Sexuality Education Month (NFSEM) in October is a time each year to convey an important message: Parents are the primary sexuality educators of their children. NFSEM was established in 1975 to encourage community support to strengthen the parental role in family sexuality education. The emphasis of the national campaign is on the importance of a partnership between community institutions and the family in sexual learning.