

# It's Easier Than You Think!

## TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

**PARENTS:** Whatever your child's age, gender, ability, sexual orientation, faith or culture – this guide is for you!

As a parent or caregiver you want your children to grow up healthy and happy. Of course, this includes their sexual health and well-being. This guide supports you in becoming your children's most trusted source of information about sexuality. It's easier than you think! You don't have to know everything about sex, you just have to start talking and keep talking about sexual topics with your children. Research findings, expert advice, how-to tips and a list of book and website resources will get you started. You'll be able to give your children the information and support they need to become sexually healthy and confident adults.

### FIND INSIDE

RESEARCH  
AGES AND STAGES  
TALKING TIPS  
ADVICE  
TEEN SEXUALITY  
RESOURCES

### » SEX, SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Sex refers to the biological aspects of reproduction and sexual health. Sexuality includes all the things that define individuals as women and men, boys and girls and anything in between. Sexual health and well-being includes the social, emotional, spiritual and physical aspects of sexuality and relationships.

### » TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN MATTERS

We are all sexual beings from birth until death. We know that sexual health and well-being is vital to living a full life. But conflicting media and cultural messages about sexuality can make this very hard to achieve. Mass media bombards us with explicit, unrealistic and often undignified sexual images and messages, targeted in particular at young people. Yet the same old cultural belief that sex is shameful, embarrassing and not to be talked about persists. No wonder we're confused. No wonder we struggle to help our children – even ourselves – achieve happy, healthy sexual lives as adults.

There is a simple solution. If you want to counteract confusing sexual messages from the Internet, music, television, magazine and friends then start talking and keep talking with your children about sex, sexuality and sexual health and well-being. The time has come to move beyond the idea of the 'big talk'. ***By making open, honest, give-and-take conversations about sexuality a normal part of family life, you are giving your children an important and lasting gift.***

### ..... A PEDIATRICIAN'S ADVICE .....

***"Try to use everyday events to bring up a little bit about sexuality, rather than relying on 'the big talk'. TV shows, music videos and overheard conversations can all be great starters for this. Stay away from scare tactics. Instead, encourage comfort and openness about sexuality - you want your children to experience sex as a positive, joyous part of their adult lives."***

– Miriam Kaufman, MD and Adolescent Health Specialist

## RESEARCH Why Talking Matters

"Studies have shown that when parents talk openly with their children and teenagers about sexuality it leads to less risky behavior, less conformity to what they think others are doing, and helps them to view their parents as good sources of information."

— [teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://teachingsexualhealth.ca)

"Parents have a significant potential to reduce adolescent sexual risk behaviors and promote healthy adolescent sexual development. One way that parents may realize this potential is by communicating with their children about sexual behaviors and decision-making."

— American Journal of PEDIATRICS, March 2008 Beyond the "Big Talk"; a study on parent-adolescent communication about sexual topics.

"Parents will be surprised to learn that THEY are in fact the real teen role models when it comes to sex, not movie, music, sport and TV stars. Parents are also considered a major source of information on sex and sexual health by their teenagers (63 per cent) and nearly half (43 per cent) consider their parents to be the most useful and valuable source of information."

— Canadian Association for Adolescent Health 2006 Sexual Behaviours and Attitudes: Canadian Teenagers and Mothers

"The more the mothers of teen girls had told them that sexual relationships were pleasurable, the more likely the teen girls were to be in consensual relationships and to use protection."

— Sharon Thompson, *Going All the Way: Teenage Girls' Tales of Sex, Romance, and Pregnancy*

[sexualhealthaccess.org](http://sexualhealthaccess.org)

## AGES AND STAGES Child Sexual Development

This is a brief summary of normal child sexual development. Find a more detailed description at [sexualityandu.ca](http://sexualityandu.ca) and [teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://teachingsexualhealth.ca)

### INFANCY # 0-2 YEARS

Pleasant, loving touch helps babies feel secure and cared for. All babies explore their bodies and learn that touching their sex organs feels good. As they acquire language, they need to hear correct names for sexual body parts: vulva, penis, breasts.

### EARLY CHILDHOOD # 3-5 YEARS

Toddlers are curious about bodies – their own and others'. They may play doctor to find out about differences. Many children this age touch their sex organs for comfort or pleasure. We must reassure them it is normal to masturbate while gently teaching them to do so in private. A common question is "Where did I come from?" Answer simply, "Babies grow in a special place inside the mother, called the womb or uterus."

### MIDDLE CHILDHOOD # 6-8 YEARS

Children this age begin to explore the masculine and feminine aspects of gender identity. Curiosity-focused sex play with friends of both sexes is common. Masturbation becomes more about pleasure. By about age six or seven they begin to develop a sense of privacy. Children this age hear about sex, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), periods and pregnancy and may ask questions that need simple, honest answers. "How are babies made?" is a common one. Answer with a brief description of sexual intercourse. The book, *Where Did I Come From?* is a helpful aid.

### LATE CHILDHOOD # 9-12 YEARS

Preteens need information about puberty: body changes, menstruation, and wet dreams. The earlier the better. Children develop at different ages and need to be reassured they are normal. Many are anticipating dating and are ready to begin learning about sexual decision making, STIs, and pregnancy prevention. They are often interested in how the media presents sexuality. This provides opportunities to talk about sexual issues.

### ADOLESCENCE # 13-18 YEARS

Dating, intimacy, and relationships are explored. Teens need information and support to make conscious, well informed decisions that protect their sexual health. Sexual orientation emerges. All teens – including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens – need support and assurance that they are loved.

# It's Easier Than You Think!

## 10 TIPS FOR PARENTS

sexualhealthaccess.org

**1 Reflect on your own upbringing.**  
How did you learn about sexuality? What was good or bad or missing? How would you have wanted it to be different? What do you want to teach your children? How do you want your children to learn about sexuality? What steps can you take to achieve this?

**2 Use the correct language for body parts.**  
From birth use the correct words: penis, scrotum, testes, vulva, vagina, breasts. After all, we don't call our elbows 'bend-bends'. This is the first and most important thing you can do. If you're comfortable using these words, your children will be too.

**3 Communicate your values.**  
You pass on your values to your children about many things. Look for chances to share your values about sexuality. Keep in mind that not saying anything allows others – like the media or peers – to form your children's values.

**4 Listen and stay calm.**  
Whether your children come to you or you start the conversation, stay calm and listen as much as you talk. Find out what they already understand by asking gentle questions, such as: "Tell me what you know about that?" Encourage your children to talk at their own pace by listening patiently and calmly. Show them they are worthy of your time and attention; they will know they can ask any question.

**5 Be honest.**  
Whatever their age, your children deserve honest answers. You don't have to be an expert; your answers can be simple. Prepare yourself for questions like "Where do babies come from?" or "How does the baby get inside the mother?" Have books ready to read with your children, even if they don't ask questions. As they get older, and the questions become more complicated, provide books and websites they can explore on their own.

**6 Repeat, repeat, repeat.**  
We all learn best through repetition. Expect your children to ask questions repeatedly. Your answers are reassuring for small children and help teens get the right message at the right time. If your kids don't ask questions rely on teachable moments. With adolescents, repeated communication has a bonus. It helps increase their comfort talking about sex and fosters a more connected parent-adolescent relationship.

**7 Look for everyday opportunities.**  
Chances to talk about sex are easy to find. A friend's pregnancy, a condom ad or a magazine cover can prompt a discussion. Share information as well as opinions and values. Surfing the Internet, listening to music or watching movies and television with your children can open the door to conversations about sexuality. Ask a question to get started: "What did you think of that music video?"

**8 It's never too late to begin talking.**  
Even if your children are in their teens and you haven't talked much about sexuality – find a place to begin. Look for a teachable moment and dive in. Value their opinions in other areas and they may decide it's safe to talk to you about sex. Settings that don't require direct eye contact – car rides, walks, washing the dishes, yard work – can lead to open, meaningful conversations.

**9 Look to your community.**  
Support the sexual health education provided in your children's school. Ask your family doctor to be involved in talking with your adolescents about sexual health issues. Make sure your older teens know what sexual health services are available in your community.

**10 Have fun.**  
As with all aspects of parenting, it always helps to have a sense of humour.

## FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Advice from Margaret Newbury Jones, M. Ed, Sexuality and Disability Educator

*"We, as families and professionals, need to recognize that having a disability does not exclude us as sexual beings. It means that we need to be taught about our bodies and our sexuality in a dignified, deliberate and respectful manner - for our lifetime. Learning how to read doesn't happen in a day and neither does learning about sexuality."*

## ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

As you build an environment of comfort and openness about sexuality in your home, it is important to talk about sexual abuse. Along with the message "your body belongs to you" you must also explain "unfortunately, some people may not respect this". Remind your child it is okay to say STOP and NO if anyone of any age - including a relative or family friend - does or says anything that makes them feel uncomfortable. Emphasize the importance of telling a trusted adult. Assure them sexual abuse is never their fault and you will help them and support them no matter what.

# Talking Tips...

## DOOR OPENERS

- *What do you think?*
- *That's a good question.*
- *Tell me what you know about that?*
- *Do you know what that word means?*
- *Let's look that up online.*
- *Help me understand what you're feeling.*
- *I'm really glad you told me about that.*

## DOOR SLAMMERS

- *You're too young.*
- *That's none of your business.*
- *Where did you hear that?*
- *If you say that word again I'll...*
- *I don't care what your friends are doing.*
- *That's just for boys (girls).*
- *We'll talk about that when you need to know.*

## MESSAGES WORTH REPEATING

- *Your body belongs to you.*
- *Everyone develops in their own way.*
- *What you're experiencing is normal.*
- *I may not know the answer, but you can ask me anything.*
- *I trust you'll make the decision that's right for you.*
- *Your sexuality lasts a lifetime - value your experiences and your relationships.*

## TEEN SEXUALITY Decision Making

A key part of adolescent development is learning decision making skills – including decisions about sexual activity. Parents can help by encouraging careful consideration and planning, as you would in any other part of your children's lives. This gives teens the best opportunity to make decisions that are right for them. Why is this important? Because about 50 per cent of Canadian students have had intercourse by the age of 17.

Perhaps the most realistic and helpful goal you can help your children strive for is **ethical sexual relationships**. This concept comes from Rev. Debra W. Haffner, Director, Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing. An American multi-faith organization founded in 2001, the Religious Institute is dedicated to advocating for sexual health, education, and justice in faith communities and society.

### Rev. Haffner says:

*“We need to acknowledge that the so-called norm of premarital chastity has never applied to the majority of young people. It is time to call for ethical sexual relationships that regardless of the age, marital status, or sexual orientation of the participants, are consensual, non-exploitative, honest, mutually pleasurable, and protected against sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies. These criteria are the same for adults and adolescents, the abled and disabled, single and married partners and people of all sexual orientations.”*

## ADVICE

When parents, mentors and caregivers talk openly and honestly about sexuality children and teenagers will have the comfort, knowledge and support they need to achieve healthy sexual lives.

### FOR PARENTS OF TEENS

#### Advice from Kim Martyn, Canadian Sexual Health Educator and Author:

“Almost all the parents I talk with want to be able to help their teens make healthy decisions about sexual matters. Besides making sure they are well informed, we can also help our young people think through how the decision about sharing themselves is made. We may feel at times that these conversations are kind of one-sided – my advice? Be brief. Be respectful. And carry on!”

Teens can find questions to help guide them in Kim Martyn's book, **All the Way: Sex for the First Time**.

### FOR MEN TO CONSIDER

#### Advice from Cory Silverberg, Certified Sexuality Educator:

“It's so important for men who are fathers, step-fathers, uncles, or primary caregivers to get involved in conversations about healthy sexuality with their children. When we're willing to talk to them about everything BUT sex, it sends a pretty clear message that sex is something not okay to talk about, not okay to ask about and, in particular, that men are not comfortable talking about sex. Whomever your children end up in relationships with, we all need the skills to navigate our way through the world including dealing with people of all genders. If I am a dad and am the one person who never talks to my children about sex, I imagine they'll take that lesson out in the world with them. I urge men to start talking with their kids about sex today.”

### ADOLESCENT SEXUAL ORIENTATION

“Pediatricians and other health-care providers must be aware of the significant psychological, social and medical issues that face young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual. Almost all of these issues arise from the stigmatization that these youth face, rather than from the orientation itself. Advice for parents is to find a way to let their son or daughter know that they are loved no matter what their orientation.”

Canadian Paediatric Society's Position Statement on Adolescent Sexual Orientation, September 2008  
[cps.ca](http://cps.ca)

## RESOURCES

Explore these resources to guide you in talking with your children about sexual health and well-being. Visit your local library, bookstore or online bookseller; choose resources you feel comfortable with. Visit websites for additional information. Share those you like with your teenager.

### For Young Children

*It's Not The Stork: A Book About Girls, Boys, Babies, Bodies, Families and Friends* by Robie Harris & Michael Emberley  
*It's So Amazing!: A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies and Families* by Robie Harris & Michael Emberley  
*The Bare Naked Book* by Kathy Stinson & Heather Collins  
*What's The Big Secret? Talking About Sex with Girls and Boys* by Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown  
*Where Did I Come From?* by Peter Mayle

### For Older Children and Young Teens

*Boys, Girls & Body Science: A First Book About Facts of Life* by Meg Hickling & Kim La Fave  
*Changes in You and Me: A Book About Puberty Mostly for Boys* by Paulette Bourgeois, Martin Wolfish & Kim Martyn  
*Changes in You and Me: A Book About Puberty Mostly for Girls* by Paulette Bourgeois, Martin Wolfish & Kim Martyn  
*Hair in Funny Places* by Babette Cole  
*It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex & Sexual Health* by Robie Harris & Michael Emberley  
*My Body, My Self for Boys (What's Happening to My Body?)* by Lynda Madaras & Area Madaras  
*My Body, My Self for Girls (What's Happening to My Body?)* by Lynda Madaras & Area Madaras  
*Sex, Puberty and All That Stuff: A Guide to Growing Up* by Jacqui Bailey & Jan McCafferty  
*What's Happening to Me?: An Illustrated Guide to Puberty* by Peter Mayle

### Web Resources for Teens

advocatesforyouth.org  
calgaryoutlink.ca  
calgarysexualhealth.ca  
goaskalice.columbia.edu  
optionssexualhealth.ca  
scarleteen.com  
sexetc.org  
sexualityandu.ca  
spiderbytes.ca  
teachingsexualhealth.ca  
teenwire.com  
youthsafe.net  
wontgetweird.com

### For Older Teens

*All the Way: Sex for the First Time* by Kim Martyn  
*Cycle Savvy: The Smart Teen's Guide to the Mysteries of Her Body* by Toni Weschler  
*Deal With It! A Whole New Approach to Your Body, Brain and Life as a gURL* by Esther Drill, Heather McDonald & Rebecca Odes  
*Doing it right: Making Smart, Safe, and Satisfying Choices About Sex* by Bronwen Pardes  
*S.E.X.: The All-You-Need-To-Know Progressive Sexuality Guide to Get You Through High School and College* by Heather Corinna  
*The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book for Girls* by Valorie Schaefer & Norma Bendell  
*The Guy Book: An Owner's Manual* by Mavis Jukes

### For Parents

*Beyond the Big Talk: Every Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Teens* by Debra W. Haffner  
*But How'd I Get in There in the First Place? Talking to Your Young Child About Sex* by Deborah Roffman  
*From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children* by Debra W. Haffner & Alyssa Haffner Tartaglione  
*Our Bodies, Ourselves: A New Edition for a New Era* by Boston Women's Health Book Collective  
*Ten Talks Parents Must Have With Their Children about Sex and Character* by Pepper Schwartz & Dominic Cappello  
*The New Speaking of Sex: What Your Children Need to Know and When They Need to Know It* by Meg Hickling

### Web Resources for Parents

calgaryoutlink.ca  
cfsh.ca  
iwannaknow.org  
kidshealth.org  
littlewarriors.ca  
pflag.org  
religiousinstitute.org  
sexualityandu.ca  
sieccan.org  
siecus.org  
talkingwithkids.org  
teachingsexualhealth.ca  
wontgetweird.com



### "It's Easier Than You Think"

Published and distributed by Sexual Health Access Alberta  
Funded by Wild Rose Foundation and community donors  
Additional resources for parents online at: [sexualhealthaccess.org](http://sexualhealthaccess.org)  
Order copies at: [info@sexualhealthaccess.org](mailto:info@sexualhealthaccess.org) or call 403-283-8591  
© 2009 Sexual Health Access Alberta. All rights reserved.

sexualityandU.ca

Administered by:  
OBSTETRICIANS AND  
GYNACOLOGISTS  
OF ALBERTA