



LET'S TALK

Speaking with your tween

The love, respect and communication involved in helping children become healthy adults—including sexually healthy adults—is the result of long-term family nurturing combined with comprehensive education.

Such family nurturing comes in many forms, all seeking the same result: to provide loving, caring and value-oriented guidance to children.

While many people agree that parents and caregivers are the primary sexuality educators of their children, extended family members can play an important role in sharing values and information, as well as providing support.

Family Members Who Teach Young People About Sexuality

- Young people 8 to 15 years of age say they learn “a lot” from their mothers (58 percent) and fathers (38 percent), and “a little” from other people in their family (42 percent) about sexuality, drugs and alcohol, violence and respecting people who are different.

-Source: *Talking with Kids about Tough Issues: A National Survey of Parents and Kids* (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001)

- Young people 10 to 15 years of age say their peers find out “a lot” from mothers (38 percent), fathers (31 percent), and brothers and sisters (23 percent) about issues like sexuality, AIDS, alcohol and drugs, and violence.

-Source: *Talking with Kids about Tough Issues: A National Survey of Parents and Kids* (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999)

Challenges to Communicating About Sexuality

Cultural values and traditions may help or hinder family communication about sexually-related issues. Economics can also play a role, affecting the time and energy that parents and caregivers have for their children. Parents and caregivers who face these and other challenges that make it difficult to address sexuality issues with their children can:

- Provide young people with pamphlets, books, videos and other resources that address sexuality-related issues. You can find these materials in libraries, bookstores, community-based organizations, schools and on the Internet.

- Identify trusted adults (with your tween) who can talk with your child about sexuality issues; these might include extended family or trusted neighbors.

- Contact the local school or faith and community based organizations to serve as a support network.

Communication Guidelines

1. You are the primary sexuality educator of your children. They want to talk with you about sexuality and to hear your values.

2. Find teachable moments. Make use of TV shows even if you believe they send the wrong message. Say “I think that program sends the wrong message. Let me tell you what I believe.”

3. Remember that it is okay to feel uncomfortable. It is often hard to talk about sexual matters. Relax and tell your children you are going to talk with them because you love them and want to help them.

4. Don't wait until your children ask questions. Many never ask. You need to decide what is important for them to know and then tell them before a crisis occurs.

5. Be “ask-able.” Reward a question with, “I'm glad you came to me.” It will teach your children to come to you when they have other questions.

6. Become aware of the “question behind the question.” The unspoken question, “Am I normal?” is often hiding behind questions about sexual development, sexual thoughts and sexual feelings. Reassure your children as often as possible.

7. Listen, listen, listen. Ask them why they want to know and what they already know. That may help you prepare your answers.

8. Remember that facts are not enough. Share your feelings, values and beliefs. Tell your children why you feel the way you do.

9. Talk about the joys of sexuality. Tell your children that loving relationships are the best part of life and that intimacy is a wonderful part of adult life.

10. Remember that you are telling your children that you care about their happiness and well-being. You are also sharing your values. This is one of the real joys of parenthood.

11. Know what is taught about sexuality in your schools, faith communities and youth groups. Other groups can help. It is often helpful when professionals lead talks.

What is Puberty?

Puberty is the time between childhood and adulthood

by Amy Levine, MA

ABOUT SEX

about sexuality and puberty.

when girls' and boys' bodies change rapidly as they grow into young women and men.

Everyone's body changes at different times and at different rates. Some young people start puberty when they are 9, 10 or 11 years old. Others start when they are in their middle to late teens. Generally, girls start puberty before boys. Caused by chemicals in the body called hormones, puberty does not happen overnight. It can last a few years.

During puberty, girls and boys experience many changes. They wonder if they are "normal." Changes include a growth spurt, increased pubic and underarm hair, acne and the development of sweat glands. They also often experience a rollercoaster of emotions—feeling happy one minute, and angry the next.

During puberty, girls' bodies change shape. Breasts develop and hips widen. Menstruation starts—making it possible for those that have intercourse to get pregnant.

During puberty, boys grow facial hair, develop deeper voices, grow larger penises, and begin to make sperm—making it possible for them to get a girl pregnant if they have intercourse.

Puberty is a time when young people often want more independence and privacy. Their relationships with friends and family often change. They may develop crushes, begin to date, experience sexual feelings, face peer pressure and struggle with body image and self-esteem.

In a national study of parents of young people 8 to 15 years of age:

- 65 percent have talked with their child about puberty.
- 52 percent said that the first time they talked with their child about puberty, they initiated the conversation.
- 34 percent said that their child brought it up.
- 51 percent have talked with their child about puberty a couple of times.

-Source: *Talking with Kids about Tough Issues: A National Survey of Parents and Kids* (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001)

Talking About Puberty

It's easy for young people to overlook the fact that parents and caregivers once went through puberty. Talking to the young people in your life about your experiences can help them prepare for the changes that happen during puberty. It also lets them know

that you are there to support them through the physical and emotional changes that they are likely to experience.

Parents and caregivers can begin the conversation when a "teachable moment" presents itself or by saying something like "I remember when I was your age and my body began to change..."

Consider sharing:

- When and how you learned about puberty.
- Who, if anyone, you felt comfortable talking with about puberty.
- How the changes you experienced made you feel.
- A positive experience you had during puberty.
- An embarrassing experience you had during puberty.
- What you wish someone had told you before you went through puberty.
- What you wish someone had told you during puberty.
- Photos of yourself before, during and after puberty.

Before talking with children about puberty, it is helpful for parents and caregivers to consider the messages they want to share.

These can include:

- Bodies change as children grow older.
- Puberty begins and ends at different ages for different people.
- Some people do not reach puberty until their later teens.
- A young person may feel clumsy, self-conscious or uncomfortable during puberty.
- The sexual and reproductive systems mature during puberty.
- Girls begin to ovulate and menstruate during puberty.
- Boys begin to produce sperm and ejaculate during puberty.
- People are able to have children only after they have reached puberty.
- Many people begin to develop sexual and romantic feelings during puberty.

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