

## STARTING THE CONVERSATION...

### **Be honest with our children.**

If you are uncomfortable talking to your child, let him/her know that. You can say something like "I feel awkward talking about your body, but it is important, so here goes!" This also gives your child permission to express discomfort about the topic.

Make sure you have the correct information to share and if your child asks you a question you don't know the answer to, just say so. Tell them you will find the answer and let them know and do it...or research it together.

### **Remember your own "sex education."**

Think how your parents did or did not speak to you about sexuality. Do you want to talk about things the same way with your children, or differently?

### **Find out what our child knows.**

Be an involved parent - speak to your child's teachers and find out exactly what they are being taught at school. This will give you a place to start a conversation as well as let you know a bit about what your child's understanding is so you can fill in any gaps. You can say something like "I talked to Ms. Smith today. She said you were learning about puberty and body changes. What kinds of things did you learn about?"

Ask your child what they know about their bodies, bodies or the opposite gender, where babies come from, etc. Don't be surprised if your child is shocked or embarrassed about these types of questions.

### **Stay calm and non-judgemental.**

If your child feels that you are getting angry or upset at what he or she is asking or telling you, he or she will feel shut down and likely end the conversation. You may not always agree with your child's opinions or beliefs about sexuality, but you need to listen calmly to what they have to say. You will not have the opportunity to teach your child your beliefs or perhaps correct misunderstandings if the conversation is over.

### **Take the topic seriously.**

Children sometimes have ideas about sexuality that are comical to us, but it is really important not to let this show. If the child is made to feel foolish, again, the conversation will end quickly.

### **Remember your child's developmental level.**

Pay attention to the questions that your child is asking, and answer them at levels that he or she can understand. Parents often make the mistake of thinking their children need more information than they do. Children will let you know they are satisfied with the answer when they stop asking questions. If a three year old child asks, "Where did you get me from?" something as simple as "from the hospital" or "you grew in mommy's tummy" will satisfy them. Obviously, a seven year old is going to want to know more. Keep your language as clear and simple as possible.

### **Raise the issue yourself.**

If your child has not and is not asking questions about sexuality, make sure you are not somehow discouraging these kinds of questions. Are they getting their information elsewhere? Children sometimes tell us that they thought their parents did not want to talk about sexuality because they never raised the issue. Children can be as uncomfortable as we are talking about sex, and may be relieved that you were the one to introduce the topic. Just because they don't ask, doesn't mean they don't need to know.

#### **Use "teachable" moments.**

If you see something on television that deals with a sexual issue, discuss your thoughts and feelings about it with your child. Pregnant women and new babies are often good opportunities to see if your child has questions. Tampon commercials can be great "teachable moments". If your child uses sexual slang terminology in your hearing, you can ask him or her where they heard it and what their understanding of the word is. Then give them accurate information. It is a good chance to teach your own values about sexuality.

#### **Use correct terminology for body parts.**

We often teach our children names for other body parts, but use cute names for sexual body parts or no names at all. Children learn eyes, ears, elbows, toes and "down there".

This is important for many reasons. By not giving children sexual body parts correct names (breasts, penis, vagina, vulva, etc.), we can give children the message that there is something somehow shameful or wrong about those parts. After all, they don't even have a name.

In addition, if your child was ever touched by another person or was made to touch someone in a sexual way, knowing the proper names of body parts makes it easier for them to tell someone what happened.

#### **Find a comfortable (or less uncomfortable) time and place.**

When talking to older children, sometimes a time or place when you do not have to look at each other makes the topic easier to discuss. For example, washing dishes together or driving in the car puts you together but you do not have to make eye contact. Having something to do with your hands can make it easier also.

#### **Open the door for communication...and leave it open.**

Even if your child does not respond to your attempts to have a discussion about sexuality or sexual matters the first time, you have raised the issue and now the topic has been introduced.

Having "the talk" on one occasion is not enough. This topic needs to be discussed often and at different ages and stages. Even if you think you have talked about it enough, research shows that children feel their parents do not talk to them about sex enough.

Use the media, newspapers, movies, billboards as jumping off points for discussion.

By making it clear that sex is not a taboo subject, you are giving your child permission to raise questions or concerns with you when he or she needs to.

#### **Become an "askable" parent.**

Don't evade or ignore questions if your child asks. Communicate to your child that they are free to ask you anything. Just be prepared for anything. And again, you don't have to have all the answers. You just need to know where to find them and then do it.

### **Sexuality is more than mechanics and plumbing.**

There is much more to teaching children about healthy sexuality than just explaining how a penis goes in to a vagina to make a baby. Your beliefs and values need to be a part of the conversation. Your children need information about love, relationships and sexual decision making. They need to know how to resist peer pressure, and how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases. Both boys and girls need information about being ready for sexual relationships, what "sex" is and responsibility.

### **Be prepared for questions much earlier than you expected.**

The media often gives children bits of information long before they would normally be exposed to it. As an example, several years ago, Bill Clinton's very public affair with Monica Lewinski had many young people asking questions about oral sex. It is important to ask your children what their understanding of a topic that they have raised is, then do your best to answer the question in an honest way that fits with their developmental level.

### **Model healthy sexuality.**

Children need to be told what is appropriate and acceptable but also shown. Remember that sexuality is more than just about sex. It is about gender roles and the way men and women interact with each other. Refrain from telling sexual or "dirty" jokes where your children can hear them. Show them respectful, equal power relationships between men and women. If children are around adults who constantly insult or degrade members of the opposite sex, they will adopt these attitudes. Demonstrating physical affection between two loving adults (for example hugging, light kissing or cuddling) in front of children is acceptable and necessary. Obviously, blatant sexual contact or invitations should be avoided. Children are more likely to engage in responsible sexual behaviour if they have positive role models. Remember that they learn most of their values and attitudes from what they see, not what they are told.

### **Teaching boundaries.**

Your children need to learn about their rights and personal boundaries when it comes to their bodies. Barbara Bonner, a researcher came up with a very short list:

- 1) It is okay to touch your private parts when you are alone.
- 2) It is NOT okay to touch other people's private parts.
- 3) It is NOT okay for other people to touch your private parts.
- 4) It is NOT okay to show your private parts to other people.

To that we would add, that it is also NOT okay for other people to show you their private parts.

These simple rules lay the groundwork for healthy boundaries. There are, of course, a few exceptions to these rules, for example if a doctor/medical professional needs to examine or apply medication to a child's private parts with a parent present.

### **Saying "no."**

One of the things that often puts children at risk of abuse by adults is that children are taught from toddlerhood to not say "not" to adults. Your child needs to be taught that it is okay to say 'no' anytime an adult wants to touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. No one has the right to touch their bodies without their express permission. This includes things like being hugged and kissed against their will, sitting on an adult's lap, or any other situation where the child does not have control over his or her own body. It is important that your child be taught to be assertive and given permission to do so with respect to their own body. However, this does NOT include saying "no" to things like bedtime or homework!