

Talking to your children about sex

If you feel uncomfortable talking about sex with your children, don't worry - this is a common reaction, but don't let it put you off. This advice from the **fpa** will help get you started.

Sex education shouldn't be a one-off talk but a gradual process of communication, starting when a child is small and continuing until they are adults. If your children grow up knowing it's ok to discuss sex and the feelings they have, then they're much more likely to come to you for support when they need it.

Why is talking about sex important?

Children will learn about sex whether you want them to or not. Sex is everywhere around us - in magazines and newspapers, in advertisements and soaps. Children and young people also learn about sex from each other - and what gets passed on in the playground may not be accurate or what parents want them to hear!

All these confusing messages may lead young people into situations they don't know how to deal with. You as a parent have an important role in making sure your child has the right information and skills to cope with these pressures.

When should I start?

It's best to start talking to your children about sex and growing up at an early age. They will often ask about where babies come from when they are very young. Even if they don't, they are already getting information from what they see and hear around them.

Puberty can start as early as eight for girls and boys may also have wet dreams or erections when they are very young, so it is important that your children are prepared. Children need this information before they start to experience bodily changes. If they don't they may be worried or afraid.

You might feel concerned that by discussing sex and relationships, particularly at an early age, you will encourage your children to start having sex when they're very young. But research has proved that the opposite is true. In fact, teenagers from families where parents talk frankly about sex wait until they are older than others before they start having sex. And when they do have sex for the first time, they are more likely to use contraceptives.

What if I don't talk to my children about sex?

Not talking about sex can affect how young people feel and behave about sex for the rest of their lives. If you don't talk to your child, they pick up the message that sex is scary and shouldn't be talked about. They may find it difficult to ask questions later about anything that worries or confuses them.

The UK has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe and sexually transmitted infections are increasing among young people. Giving your children support, information and help to feel good about themselves can lessen the chances of both.

How can I make it easier?

Many parents feel uncomfortable or embarrassed talking about sex. Don't let this stop you, however - there are some ways to make it easier:

- **Start early.** You'll find it less awkward if you introduce the topic when your child is very young. Answer questions simply and naturally. You don't have to say much - children are happiest learning in small steps.
- **Use everyday situations** to start conversations. Television programmes are often a good opportunity to talk about relationships. Or talk when you're doing something like the washing up. This makes your child feel that sex is a normal part of family life and not a special subject.
- **Have books or leaflets** for your child to read or you to look at together. See below for our list of resources.
- **Have a line up your sleeve** for difficult moments, such as "That's a good question, let's talk about it when we get home." And make sure you do.
- **Ask your child what they think** about these issues. This tells you how much they know and helps you give answers they understand.
- **Children notice the tone** of what you say as much as what you say. So don't get cross or put them down.
- **If you don't know the answer, say so** but find out later.
- **Try to be truthful** as stories about storks and gooseberry bushes just confuse children!

How do I talk to 3- to 4-year-olds?

By this age children are aware and curious about the differences between the sexes. They peek under each other's clothing and like to play mummies and daddies. Questions they often ask at this age include "Where do babies come from?" and "Can men have babies?".

With young children a simple, short and truthful answer is all that is needed. You can use the excellent books on the body to help you introduce the subject, especially for those children who don't ask questions!

At this age children may touch their genitals. This is a good time to teach children about the difference between private and public behaviour and also about wanted and unwanted touching. Reading them stories is often a way of talking about different feelings and relationships.

How do I talk to 5- to 8-year-olds?

At these ages children are learning what their bodies can and can't do and how things work. They are curious about their own and other people's bodies and pregnancy and childbirth. They continue to play games like doctors and nurses and to explore each other's bodies, including the genitals. This is all normal.

All children need to know that their bodies will be changing. Try to build on what was learnt earlier about sex and reproduction. For example, unpacking the shopping which includes a box of tampons, is an ideal time to explain what tampons are. Some girls start having periods as early as eight years old, so it's best to tell girls about periods by this age.

Boys also need to be told about periods and can feel left out if they're not told. They also need information about how their own bodies will start to develop.

How do I talk to older children?

Older children may not want to admit that they don't know things. If your children say they know all about sex just ask them what they know and fill in the gaps. Help by making it easy for them to ask you questions, and show that you're sympathetic and approachable.

You may have religious or other moral views about sexual responsibility, which you want to introduce to your children at this stage. You need also to explain that being responsible about sexual behaviour means:

- considering the needs and feelings of their partner
- discussing the relationship both partners want
- not having sex if your partner isn't ready
- using contraception unless both people want a baby
- practising safer sex to avoid sexually transmitted infections.

What if they don't want to talk to me?

Teenagers often find it much harder to talk to their parents and about sex and growing up than young children. This shows the importance of talking to children when they are much younger, rather than leaving it until they feel really awkward. It helps if they know that you're always ready to talk to them.

You may have to accept that your teenager doesn't want to talk to you - it doesn't mean that you're a failure as a parent. Part of the process of growing up involves becoming more independent of parents. Children need privacy and the chance to make their own decisions but to have your support when they need it. You can help by making sure that they know where else to get advice if they do not want to discuss these issues with you.

Useful books

There are lots of books available for parents and children about sex. The list below is not exhaustive but includes a number of recommendations from the fpa. It's also worth going to your local bookseller and ask what they've got.

- **For under fives:** 'Mummy Laid an Egg' by Babette Cole, published by Red Fox Picture Books
- **For five years onwards:** 'How Are Babies Made?' By Alastair Smith, published by Usborne

- **For nine years onwards:** 'Let's Talk About Where Babies Come' From by Robie Harris, published by Walker Books (approved by fpa)
- **For 11 years onwards:** 'Let's Talk About Sex' by Robie Harris, published by Walker Books (approved by fpa)
- **For all ages:** 'Questions Children Ask and How to Answer Them', by Dr Miriam Stoppard - this has a wide variety of questions on all topics with answers in language appropriate to different age bands.
- **From fpa: (for nine+):** There's a 'Parents Pack' available (only in the UK) which includes fpa's range of booklets for young people; 4Boys, 4Girls, 4You, Abortion, Is Everybody Doing it?, Love STIngs, Periods, Pregnancy, Talking to your child about sex. For more information about how to buy this call 0845 122 8600.

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