

My Kid Needs to Know What? An Age By Age Guide to Sex Education – And What to Do! (by Cath Hakanson)

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57,089 views

When it comes to sex education, parents usually have many questions. How do I start? What do I say? When do I say it?

Sex education has (thankfully) changed since we were kids. You simply cannot do sex education with a big one-off talk (even if you think you have covered everything). Today it is about lots of small, frequent, repetitive conversations with your child.

So why do you need to talk to your kids about all this stuff?

Firstly, your kids are going to hear about sex, from their friends, from surfing the internet, and by watching the television. By getting in first, you are making sure that they receive the right information and more importantly, that they know how you feel about it.

Secondly, is that you are actually influencing what your kids will one day do about sex. Kids that receive good sex education are more likely to delay having sex and when they do start, they are more likely to avoid unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections.

Here you will find an outline of the different things about sex that kids eventually need to know about. The topics and ages are just a guide, and are based on what we know about child sexual development, and in keeping our kids healthy and safe in our world today.

Babies and toddlers (0-24 months)

- The names of their body parts- yes, the penis and vulva too!
- That it is okay to touch all parts of their body – let them grab their vulva or penis at bath time or during nappy changes.
- Start pointing out the differences between boys and girls – boys have penises and girls have vulvas.
- Start talking about the functions of our body parts – urine comes out through your penis/vulva, poo comes out through your bottom/anus (and it is okay to use appropriate slang, just not all of the time).

- If they like being naked all the time, start introducing boundaries about nudity – there is a time and a place to be naked (and it isn't at the park!).

The support they need.

Technically, it isn't really sex education at this age. It is really just about letting your child explore their whole body and to start pointing out simple differences between boys and girls. When naming the parts of their bodies you can also include their penis or vulva and also talk about what they can do – 'yes, that is your penis and your wee (urine) comes out of there!'. The end goal is for your child to be comfortable with their whole body and to see all parts as being equal (with no shame).

Early childhood (2-5 years)

Our bodies

- The correct names of the body parts and what they do.
- That boys and girls are different but are also the same – girls have a vulva, boys have a penis but we all have nipples/bottoms/noses/hands, etc.
- That our bodies are different and that is okay to be different.
- That our bodies can tell us what we are feeling – we have many different feelings and we can feel them in our body.

Privacy

- That some parts of the body are private -these aren't for the whole world to see.
- That there are private and public places and times – this one is a tricky one for kids to learn as it changes. For example, it might be okay for your child to be naked at home when their grandmother is visiting but not the plumber!
- To respect other people's privacy. For example, if the bathroom door is closed, that they should knock and ask if they can come in.
- That they are entitled to privacy too – like when they go to the toilet, are in the bath or getting dressed.
- That conversations about bodies are for private times at home and with their parents (not in the school yard).

Touching ourselves

- That it is okay to touch their penis or vulva but that there is a time and a place for it.

- Set limits around genital play. Explain that touching your own genitals can feel good but that it is a private activity, like toileting, and it should happen in a private place, like in their bedroom.
- If your child grabs their genitals when they are out socially, gently remind them that they need to keep their hands out of their pants. Don't make a big fuss as they are doing it because it makes them feel more secure. Eventually they will outgrow it!
- If found playing 'doctor' with a friend (looking at each other's genitals), take a deep breath, calmly interrupt them, ask them to get dressed and distract them into another toy or game. Later on, you can discuss privacy and rules about touching.

Babies

- That all living things reproduce- trees drop seeds, dogs have puppies and humans have babies. Slowly start pointing out examples of reproduction when you see it.
- A baby grows inside the woman – uterus or baby bag or even tummy (you'll get specific later on).
- Both a man and a woman are needed to make a baby.
- How a baby is made – that you need a part from a man (cell or sperm) and a part from a woman (cell or egg) to make a baby. 'Where do I come from' is usually the first question kids ask!
- That a baby grows inside a woman. Keep it super simple – they only want basic concepts. The details come much later.
- If they want to know how the baby comes out, just explain that it comes out of the woman's stomach or through her vagina.
- That making babies is for adults and not for kids to do. Get into the habit of reminding them of this, every time you talk about it.

Body ownership and touching

- That they are the boss of their body and have a right to say who can touch their body (you included).
- That it is not okay to hug or touch someone if they don't want you to (and vice versa).
- That sometimes there are reasons for an adult to look at or touch their body, like a doctor or nurse.
- That we don't keep secrets about our bodies. Secrets can be about surprises and presents.
- That they can always tell you about anything that makes them feel bad or funny.

The support they need

Preschoolers are the easiest age to teach. They are like empty sponges, ready to soak up information about anything and everything. If they haven't had an explanation that makes sense to them, they will use their imagination to make up their own reason. Get ready to repeat yourself as they easily forget and sometimes they don't understand you the first time or only hear part of it. And don't forget to ask them what they mean, so that you give them the right answer!

You want to set yourself as their number one source for information. This means being honest and answering their questions about babies. By answering, you are giving your child the message that they can talk to you about anything and that you are a reliable source for information. This is a good thing, especially once they start to have contact with other kids.

If you are struggling with the words to use, there are some fantastic sex education books that you can use. They provide the information and are written in an age-appropriate way. Also, at this age, they don't notice if you slip an educational book into the pile of books that you read before bed each night!

Middle childhood (5-8 years)

Our bodies

- Know what words to use when talking about body parts (both boys and girls) – penis, testicles, scrotum, anus, vulva, labia, vagina, clitoris, uterus and ovaries.
- To have some knowledge of the internal reproductive organs – uterus, ovary, fallopian tubes, urethra, bladder, bowel.
- That bodies come in all different shapes, sizes and colours.
- Both boys and girls have body parts that feel good when touched.
- To be able to look after their own body i.e. private parts, hair, teeth, skin, etc.
- To have refusal skills in place – 'Stop, I don't like that'.

Puberty

- That their bodies will change as they get older.
- That puberty is a time of physical and emotional change. If they want to know what changes, just talk about how this is the stage where they grow into an adult.

Sexual intercourse

- That a baby can happen when a man's sperm joins a woman's ovum and that it usually happens by sexual intercourse (IVF is another way).
- That a baby is made when sperm leave the man through his penis and go into the woman's vagina. They then find their way to the place where the egg is. The egg and the sperm then join together, and grow into a baby.
- That adults have sex and that it's a natural, normal and healthy part of life.
- That adults often kiss, hug, touch and engage in other sexual behaviours with one another to show caring for each other and to feel good.
- That sex is an adult activity and is not for kids.
- That adults can choose whether or not to have a baby.

Sexual behaviour

- Masturbation – some kids do and some don't.
- That all sexual behaviour is private i.e. masturbation, sexual intercourse.
- That bodies can feel good when touched.
- That sometimes people look at pictures of naked people or people having sex on the internet and this is not for kids. You also need to discuss with your child what they should do when (not if) they come across these images.
- Explain that there are different sexual orientations such as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual.

Love

- Love means having deep and warm feelings for yourself and others.
- People can experience different types of love.
- People express love in different ways to their parents, families and friends.
- Dating is when two people are romantically attracted to each other and spend their free time together.
- Dating starts as a teen.
- People can experience different loving relationships throughout their lives.

Friendships

- You can have many friends or just a few.
- You can have different types of friends.
- Friends can be angry with each other and still be friends.
- Friends spend time together and get to know each other.

- Friends can hurt each other's feelings.
- Friendships depend on honesty.
- Friends can be older or younger, male or female.

Families

- There are different types of families.
- Families can change over time.
- Every member has something unique to contribute.
- Family members take care of each other.
- Families have rules to help them live together.
- Members of a family can live in different places and still be a family.

Personal skills

- Everyone has rights, kids too.
- People communicate in many different ways.
- It is okay to ask for help.
- Start practicing decision making around the home.
- All decisions have consequences – positive and negative.
- Practice assertiveness.
- Practice negotiation skills to resolve a problem or conflict.

The support they need

This is the stage where your kids believe and absorb everything you say – so don't waste this opportunity to set yourself up as their main source for information. If you don't they will just get it from somewhere else (friends and the media).

There is a big difference between what a 5-year-old and an 8-year-old needs to know – as they get older, you need to give them more details and repeat yourself a lot more!

Try to answer their questions as honestly and matter-of-factly as possible. Ask them 'what do you think?' – this helps you to work out what they already know and what they want to know. Make sure that you give them enough information so that they don't make wrong conclusions, e.g. if you say that a baby is made when a man and woman sleep together, they may think that means when they lie down next to each other. Check that they have understood what you have said and to see if they have any more questions.

Some kids don't ask questions, which means that it is up to you to start the conversation. You can do this by looking for everyday opportunities to start a conversation – a pregnant woman, a couple kissing on TV, menstrual products in the bathroom. You could also buy some sex education books to read together.

Late childhood (9-12 years)

Puberty

- All of the above but in much greater detail
- What physical, social and emotional changes to expect with puberty (both sexes).
- Girls need to know be prepared for their first period.
- Boys need to know about ejaculation and wet dreams.
- That fertility happens once girls start having periods and boys start producing semen.
- That both boys and girls are able to have babies after they have reached puberty.

Sexual behaviour

- More details about sexual intercourse and other sexual behaviours.
- Basic information about STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections) and how to prevent them through safe sex (condoms).
- Basic information about how to avoid pregnancy (condoms, delaying sexual intercourse).
- Awareness of their parent's sexual values and beliefs – love, dating, contraception, when it is okay to become sexually active, etc.
- That they will start to feel more sexual and develop romantic feelings towards their peers. Sexual intercourse is not typical at this age, it is more likely to be kissing and hugging.
- That same sex fantasy and attraction is not unusual and does not necessarily indicate sexual orientation.
- That sexuality is exaggerated in pornography.
- How to be cybersmart and to use their mobile phone safely.
- The characteristics of respectful relationships.

The support they need

This may be your last chance to talk while your child is still willing to listen to you! As they approach their teens, they are starting to rely more on their friends for answers and

information. This means that you need to make sure they know that they can come and talk to you about anything (and I mean anything).

So answer their questions honestly and provide them with more detailed information. If you don't know the answer to their question, look for the answer together. Don't just tell them the facts but share what your values and beliefs are about it, especially when it comes to topics such as love, dating, sexual intercourse and contraception.

You'll need to start getting creative and find some new ways to start talking with them (give them a book, talk whilst driving them somewhere, talk about something you both see while watching TV. You can also help them to develop decision-making, communication and assertiveness skills.

Adolescence and beyond...

If you haven't started talking to your kids about sex by this stage, you had better get moving! It is never too late to start, but it will be a lot more challenging!

Adolescence is when sex education really starts to get sexual! There's a lot of tough topics out there – dating, contraception, when to have sex, how to say 'no', to name a few!

The huge benefit of talking to your kids from an early age is that you have empowered them with the knowledge to be able to make good decisions about sex. You will also have a relationship with them where they know that they can talk to you about anything – and I mean anything!

The information that you have given your child is important, but what really matters is that you are talking about it! That is what really matters!

(And remember, it is never too late to start talking!)
