

How To Talk To Your Kids About Sex

It may be the most important talk you will ever have with your child! The “big talk” about sex should come early (we recommend the eighth birthday), but it is never too late! A “preemptive strike” can give your child a healthy, positive, respectful view of human intimacy that will stand up to all the garbage that will come from the media and the peer group. And being able to talk together about THE MOST intimate subject will make any and every other subject “on limits” between you and you child.

But all parents need help with this subject! We tend to avoid it and delay it and feel embarrassed and hesitant about it. Well ... help is on the way! What follows has been used successfully by thousands of parents who have had truly beautiful and memorable talks. (The first “big talk” and important follow-up ones) with their kids. This “open” part of valuesparenting.com will give you the basics, and if you want and need more (including an actual dialogue to use with your child), you can find it in the members section.

Our discussions with parents around the world, ranging from individual one-on-one conversations to question-and-answer sessions in large lecture halls, have convinced us that parents want and need practical, usable help. They want to know how to talk to their kids about sex in a positive, pragmatic way, and they want reassurance that their voice and their influence can outweigh that of the media and the peer group.

That’s what we’ve tried to provide in here, with the suggestion that the centerpiece be the “big talk” that we suggest for age eight. (It’s best to start early ... yet it’s never too late, and there are suggestions for adapting it for older kids.) This pivotal discussion should be preceded by preparatory dialogues and followed by discussions designed to continue all through adolescence, each adaptable to your situation, your personality, and the age of your child.

Our theory is that the best (and most effective) reason for sexual restraint and responsibility is that it increases one’s chances for a successful and lasting long-term commitment and for a safe and happy family. A child with this goal, this hope, this vision will make better decisions in every area of his or her life. The adjectives “beautiful” and “awesome” are used repeatedly to symbolize this positive approach. The single greatest protection for kids (and the strongest motivation for avoiding early, dangerous sex) is to grow up thinking of sex as a wonderful, spectacular miracle that not only makes babies but also can bind couples and families together in a loyal, happy way. The words “beautiful and awesome” will come to represent this to your child.

There five recurrent themes in this approach:

1. *Preemptive Information*: No realistic parent believes he or she can be the only source of sexual information to a child. The media, the peer group, and the school will all play large (and mixed) roles. But parents with the right message and the right timing can preempt negative and harmful information. They can also create a positive frame of reference and an effective filter through which kids can interpret and internalize what is useful and helpful to them, and screen out or set aside what is harmful or dangerous.

2. *Family*: The hope (and the goal) of all parents is to maximize the happiness and well-being of their children and help those children to one day have happy families of their own. Sex is always approached in this book as a matter of family. The ultimate danger of the misuse of sex is the destruction of family, and the best use of sex is to strengthen the family.

3. *Correct Principles*: The most important principles that parents can convey to their children are pointedly and practically taught as families talk about sex. Open communication, delayed gratification, and the effective implementation of goals and plans are only a few of the principles that parents can teach along with and as part of a positive approach to marriage and sex.

4. *Realism*: Some characterize anything other than giving in to casual, experimental sex as “unrealistic.” But the best definition of “realistic” is being aware of what is really going on and acting accordingly.

A great description of “what is really going on” was presented by Leonard Pitt in a Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service article:

The world we have made is harshly different [from] the one we once knew. This culture didn't develop from that one, it mutated. These are rawer, cruder, colder times, and sexual promiscuity has become a knife's edge of danger that would have stunned us. Sex has flooded our children.

In this reality, there is only one realistic course to take: to do all we can to protect our children and prevent them from getting into the current naive and dangerous promiscuity that can harm them in so many ways.

A Focus on the Personal: Because of the personal nature of the subject matter, we have tried to write this approach in a very personal way. Our challenge to you is to read these ideas as personally as they were written. Apply it to your own children and to your own life.

Questions and Answers

We conclude most of the lectures and seminars we give on speaking to kids about sex with a question-and-answer period. The following are the most common questions parents have and some of the answers we offer.

Question: Why is it so hard to talk to your own kids about sex (so hard that a shocking number of parents never do it)?

Answer: There are three reasons: the embarrassment we recall about the subject and our own conscious and subconscious inhibitions, our lack of a plan or an agenda or a clear idea of what we ought to say and how we ought to say it, and our own ambiguity about what we ourselves believe about sex and what we want our children to believe.

Question: Even with help – proven methods, dialogues, and so forth – can a parent compete with media and peers as a major influence in how kids think about sex?

Answer: Yes! A parent who starts early and knows what he or she is doing can be the dominant influence, superseding and overwhelming all other voices.

Question: Does talking with my child about sex have to be uncomfortable and embarrassing for both of us?

Answer: No! Quite the contrary. If you do it the right time and in the right way, it can be enjoyable and natural – and can build a powerful and deep emotional bond between you and your child that facilitates other kinds of communication and trust.

Question: Is it harder for a single parent to talk to kids about sex?

Answer: Yes and no. It may be harder in the sense that you're on your own, without a spouse to support you or to do part of the discussing or to help sort out how to approach it, but the objective and principles are the same. In a way it is easier because you're the only one doing it. You have control and consistency in what you say and in how and when you say it. A lot of single parents, because they're on their own, take their responsibility more seriously and actually do a better job. (Although the plural, *parents*, is often used in this program, be assured that everything herein is equally applicable and equally intended for single parents.)

Question: What is the most important thing when talking to kids about sex?

Answer: The single most important thing is to make it a positive, exciting, joyful subject and to link the subject to marriage and family and to love and commitment in a clear and positive way.

Question: Is eight really the best age for the “big talk?” Some would say it’s too early, some would say too late.

Answer: It is important to have your main discussion (and your pre- and follow-up discussion) early enough that they form your child’s initial attitudes toward sex and serve as a deflector of all the “silliness,” “dirtiness,” and nonsense that children hear from friends, peers, and media. But having it too early raises issues that kids aren’t ready for .

Question: Is the objective here to protect my child, to make her aware of the physical and emotional dangers of sex?

Answer: Yes and no. We do need to protect our children, but it is an awareness of the beautiful power and positive commitment in the right kind of sex that gives children the best motivation and capacity to avoid what could hurt them and others.

Question: As a parent, is it unusual for me to hope my child approaches sex more carefully and more conservatively than I did? Am I a hypocrite if I try to teach my child to abstain in ways I did not?

Answer: It is very common for parents to wish their children would wait for real commitment (because of physical safety, emotional safety, moral beliefs, hopes of a better marriage – and a host of other reasons). Most parents’ views are surprisingly conservative when it comes to what they wish for and think is best for their children. And it is not hypocritical to teach something you have not always lived, especially if you truly feel it is what is best for today. Good parenting means wanting something better for one’s children.

Question: But is it realistic to hope for (and work for) less sexual activity before commitment and marriage?

Answer: The facts indicate that it is. More and more respected thinkers are concluding that this form of “delayed gratification” is smarter as well as safer. And things are changing: Kids in age groups who didn’t want to admit they were virgins five years ago now feel pride in the fact. But these are individual decisions, and the overwhelming reality is that parents need to decide what course is best for their children and then take concrete, positive steps to improve their children’s chances of taking that course.

Question: But can I decide what is best for my child, or does he have the right to grow up and decide for himself?

Answer: Let us repeat the metaphor from our book *Teaching Your Children Values*: “Expecting a young child to discover what is right for him is like putting him in a small boat, in the current, without a paddle, heading for Niagara Falls.” Of course a child will eventually decide for himself, but *not* to teach him what our experience (and our heart) tells us is best is the most serious form of parental abdication of responsibility.

Question: But what if I’m not sure what is best?

Answer: One of the most demanding (and most beneficial) parts of parenting is sorting out what we believe, so we can teach those beliefs with honesty to our children. No one can do that for you, but this program may help.

Question: How much does the media's portrayal of sex influence our children? Does casual, irresponsible, or indifferent sex in the media harm us as much as casual, irresponsible, or indifferent violence in media?

Answer: Media sex is actually a bigger danger than media violence. A tiny percentage of kids copy or reenact the violence they see, but countless thousands imitate the irresponsible, uncommitted, casual sex that they see nearly every time they turn on the TV or go to a movie. Perhaps if kids carried Uzi machine guns around with them, they would imitate more of the violence they see. They do carry their sexuality around with them, so the potential for imitation is truly frightening. The directly related societal costs of teen pregnancy, abortion, disease, and depression that result make teenage sexual activity the biggest social problem facing America today and make irresponsible media sex a huge culprit.

Question: What if my child is already sexually active?

Answer: *Don't give up!* It's never too late to make the subject of sex more open and more positive between you and your child. *Don't give in!* If you believe that waiting for real love and commitment is best, is *right*, then don't give in to the status quo. There is a whole movement in this country about "regaining virginity," about deciding to wait for marriage. *Don't give out!* Don't get too tired to try. Don't ever abdicate this part of your parental responsibility. Adapt the discussions suggested in here. Make particular use of the section entitled "Starting Over." Stay positive. Let the child know that you love him unconditionally but are concerned about the things he is doing. Be specific. Help him sort it out.

Timing

The timing is a matter of balance – not telling children too much, too early, before they're interested or ready to understand, but not waiting until they know too much from negative, incomplete, wrong sources. We feel that the peak of a child's readiness is at age eight, when he or she is very verbal and conceptual and is flattered by responsibility and by being treated as a "grown up." This age is like a marvelous window. Kids are old enough to understand but not old enough to be cynical. They are old enough to have real interest and fascination but not old enough to be embarrassed or closed off or to have a lot of preconceptions. Before the big talk, you should hold some preliminary discussions to prepare the way. And after the big talk there are a number of related subjects that need to be discussed in more detail. Then, as your child enters and experiences adolescence, the focus shifts from facts to behavior, from *knowing* what he should to *doing* what he should, and to acting with restraint and responsibility.

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(If your child is between eight and twelve, the “big talk” suggested here is still workable and appropriate but will have to be modified so it doesn’t sound as if you’re “talking down” to your child and to allow for a child who knows more and probably has more questions.)

Phase I Preliminary “As Needed” Talks with Three to Eight Year Olds

Answering questions Without Going Beyond Them

A mother told us a funny (but point-making) story. Her five-year-old son came up to her one evening at home and said, “Mom, where did I come from?” She thought of trying to detour or escape the question somehow, but there was no ready excuse. The two of them were alone at home that night, and she figured that if her son was asking, she’d better summon up her courage and tell him.

They sat down in the living room, and the mother launched into it, not too smoothly and feeling a little embarrassed, but giving it her best shot. The little boy’s eyes got wider and wider as he listened without a word, just nodding his head slightly whenever his mother said, “Do you understand that?” And shaking his head slowly whenever she said, “Did you know that?” When she was finished, she said, “Does that answer your question?”

The little fellow squirmed around and said, “Well ... I just meant ... you know ... where did we come from? Like before we moved here last year. I forgot the name of our other town.”

While usually not as dramatic as in this story, it is easy to tell very young children too much. The best policy, until they are seven or eight, is just to respond to their questions, their *real* questions, with simple answers, always deferring detail to later and using the interchange as a way to build a positive anticipation for when they turn eight.

So if a five year old says, “Where do babies come from?” say, “Sometimes when a mommy and daddy love each other, it helps make a baby.” If he says, “But *how?*” say, “It’s like a miracle, a wonderful, unbelievable magic. When you’re eight, we’ll tell you about it.”

Appreciation for Bodies

A healthy attitude about sex starts with how a child feels about his own body. At a very young age children become aware of their bodies and what they can do.

We've seen how older preschoolers continued to find awe and wonder in their bodies while observing thousands of kids go through our Joy Schools.

In dealing with young children, every available opportunity should be taken to point out how lucky we are to be able to see the beauties of the season, to hear creative and inspirational music, to taste different and unique combinations of food (a couple of our children would not call this a joy), to touch a baby's cheek or a kitten's soft fur, and especially to feel the love that we have for the others in our family. The list of things to point out and be grateful for is endless. The more a child can appreciate his own body as a preschooler, the better foundation he will have for feeling positive about the greatest of all physical miracles.

Family Commitments, Loyalty, and Love

What do commitment, love, and loyalty have to do with talking to your children about sex? Everything! Whether you are reading this as a loyal, committed, loving spouse and parent who was also lucky enough to grow up in a close family, or as a single parent who has had no role modeling for these qualities now or in childhood, you *can* talk to your kids about them. Whether your model is something you've experienced or something you've wished for, you can share your feelings with your children. If you have always been exposed to loyalty, love, and commitment, tell your child about it. Share some of the childhood experiences you can remember about how your parents showed their love for each other and express how much you love your spouse, their other parent. Add stories of family loyalty – cheering at your brother's games even though you were a little jealous that he got all the attention, your dad showing up at your birthday party even though it was difficult for him, the love you felt from your parents as they tucked you in bed and praised you for a job well done. Kids love to hear stories about you as a child with their grandparents as parents.

If you grew up in difficult circumstances or have been hurt by unfaithfulness or family disloyalty, tell your children a little about it and reassure them of your commitment to never let it happen in your own family. At bedtime or some other appropriate setting say something like: "I think one of the most important things in a family is to know that we love each other. I will always love you, and you will always be the most important thing in my life. No matter how hard life gets outside these walls, you need to know that our family will always be here for you. It wasn't always that way for me."

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Note: For those wanting more detail, actual dialogue to use with younger (3-8) children on “Awe and Wonder in Nature,” “Modesty in Dress and Appearance,” and “Respecting and Protecting Our Bodies” appears in the member section along with a “fable” bedtime story designed to prepare young children for “The Big Talk.”

Phase II: “The Big Talk” (suggested for age 8)

Preparation

Age eight is a “window” between the disinterest of very young childhood and the moodiness and unpredictability of pre-puberty. (Again, if your child is over eight but under twelve, go forward boldly with this talk, but modify appropriately.) Most eight year olds are trusting, open, innocent, anxious to please, and fairly fascinated by the world around them. They simply haven’t yet learned to be embarrassed, sarcastic, or cynical.

Depending on where they live, some kids have heard quite a bit about sex by the time they’re eight; others have heard next to nothing. Still others have heard quite a lot but paid no attention to it. Regardless of how much they have or haven’t heard, whatever is on their slate is written pretty lightly and can be erased or rewritten or corrected by a prepared, committed parent. (Note, however, that these ideas are not written for parents who have to deal with an abuse problem. Such situations usually require counseling and professional medical expertise.)

One of the greatest things about most seven and eight year olds is their susceptibility to anticipation and excitement. Because of this it is possible to really pump them up, to build a positive and happy level of enthusiasm leading up to the “big talk.”

Unless you have compelling reasons for starting earlier or unless your child is already older than eight, we suggest that you target and plan for the day or week of the eighth birthday for the “big talk.” Pegging it to a birthday can help build the desired kind of positive, excited anticipation. (It also gives you a deadline so you won’t put it off.) If your child is a little older than eight, pick or designate some other special day that is at least a few weeks in the future.

Planning

As the birthday draws close, let your child choose a special place to spend the evening “exclusively” – just the child and you (both parents if married). This is a time separate and apart from the birthday party, which you might want to

hold earlier in the day. The evening is just for the two or three of you and is devoted to “the most beautiful and awesome thing in the world.”

Help the child choose a quiet, conversation-friendly place like a nice restaurant with a private booth or perhaps place in the country where you could take a nice drive in the car. At home by the fire or on a cozy sofa is fine, too, as long as you can have privacy and not be interrupted. If the child prefers an activity of some kind, do it early enough that you can still have the evening open for the “big talk.”

Well before the special day arrives, make a visit to the library or bookstore and pick out the picture book you will use as an aid in your discussion. Many are available under categories such as “maturation” and “child sex education.” Have the librarian or bookstore salesperson help you. You will likely find at least half a dozen to choose from, but it’s best to choose one book rather than two or three. Our personal favorite is *Where Did I Come From?* by Peter Mayle. An alternative is *How Babies Are Made* by Andrew Audrey and Stephen Schep. Both of these are candid and clear and have a nice tone of importance balanced with “lightness” so the subject doesn’t seem oppressive. Get familiar with the book you choose and “rehearse” once or twice before you go.

“Booster” Discussions

Some parents may read this heading and think, “Oh, no – *more* discussions? It’s hard enough just to get through the “big one.” Actually, once you have had the age eight discussion, sex will be a far easier subject to approach with your child. In fact, if anything, some eight year olds want to discuss it too much – and with just about everyone. We’ll never forget an experience with one of our sons at a Cub Scout banquet, just after his eighth birthday. He was seated at the other end of a long banquet table, and when we looked over at him during dessert, we noticed that he was the center of attention: Every other Cub Scout around him was leaning in, listening attentively, as Josh held court with his newfound wisdom. And it wasn’t in the hushed tones of some joke or dirty story, it was expansive, open, excited, as if he were talking about the most wonderful, awesome thing in the world! Needless to say, we had forgotten the part of our discussion that suggested privacy and discretion.

The point is that once an eight year old has the positive orientation of the big talk, subsequent discussions are not difficult. In fact, you will find it enjoyable to administer a few “booster shots,” or follow-up discussions.

Note: Again for those wanting an actual dialogue to use in the “big talk” (it reads like a script, showing what you say and what your child will likely respond) ¼ such can be found in the member section.

Phase III: Follow-up Talks With 8-13 Year Olds

Middle-Aged Kids

The follow-up discussions suggested here are for kids between the ages of eight and thirteen, between the conceptual and interest threshold that comes at about eight years and the changes of puberty that come in early adolescence. We call this important but often neglected age span the “middle age” of childhood.

In a way it is a magic time and certainly an opportunistic time for parents. Middle-aged kids are usually extremely curious and interested. They are conversational and conceptual enough to understand most of what is explained to them. They are flattered by responsibility and by being treated as grownups. They are not yet emotionally or hormonally preoccupied with sex, so they can mentally take a step back and look at sex objectively. And at this age they don't yet, for the most part, have the cynicism, sarcasm, and skepticism that lurks just around the corner in full-fledged adolescence. In short, it is the optimal time to teach a lot of value- and character-related things as well as intellectual things.

When parents go on the offense with middle-aged kids, they often avoid being constantly on the defense with adolescents and teenagers. If we teach our children what to do in the eight-to-thirteen window, we'll spend less time telling them what not to do later. And the trust level and communication patterns we set up before adolescence will carry into the teen years, the period when parent-child understanding often dries up.

All of the follow-up discussions suggested in this section should happen by the time your child enters adolescence and puberty. Then you are in on the ground floor: You, as the parent, have had the “first word” on each important aspect. All that your child sees and hears and experiences of sex in the years ahead will have a chance of falling within the positive framework you have built. This also preserved open communication, allowing you to advise your child on the sex-related scenarios and situations that will come during adolescence and beyond.

In other words, if you have these suggested early, preemptive discussions about sex with your child and thus establish the direction of your child's thinking, then subsequent sex-related messages or situations or circumstances that could otherwise be problematic will become opportunities for further discussion and for reemphasis of what is best and what is not.

Media

Take the time to watch a sitcom or two with your child or to watch whatever he or she likes on TV. It is almost a certainty that parts of the plot or dialogue will have sexual references or implications. When the show is over, ask “opinion” questions: “Did people do the right thing?” “What did some of the words they used mean?” “Do you think they ‘get it’ – about sex being the most beautiful thing in the world?” The same kinds of discussion can also be generated by thumbing through a current magazine together. Even the sexual innuendo of the advertisements leads to good follow-up discussions.

Or you can take a more general approach: “What are your favorite TV shows or movies?” “Do they have anything at all about sex in them?” “Did you hear any words or see anything about sex that you didn’t understand?” “Well, you know, now that we’ve had our big talk and everything, whenever you see or hear anything about sex, tell me what it was and whether you understand it and whether you think it was okay or not okay.”

Peer Group

When you’re the “soccer mom” or the “pick-up dad,” listen in on your kids’ conversations. What are they talking about? Are there certain friends who bring up sexual subjects or use sexual terminology? How do other kids respond? Just by listening you’ll often have the basis for a little private conversation later. “I sure like your friends. They’re good kids. Which of them do you think knows about sex? Why do you think so? Billy talks a lot about it, doesn’t he? What do you think of what he says?” Keep everything positive and nonjudgmental but take opportunities to remind your child that many other kids don’t know all the details, so they’re a little silly or a little gross about the whole thing. Always ask your child if she has any questions about anything she’s heard.

The more general approach here would be to simply ask a few things when there is a private moment or two. “Now that you know all about sex, I’ll bet you notice kids talking about it or using words about it sometimes. Do you?” “Which of your friends do you think knows the most about it?” “Do you think they’ve had a ‘big talk’ with their parents?” “Do you think they know how beautiful and awesome sex can be?” “Why do you think some kids make fun of it or tell jokes about it?”

Regardless of how you get these little incidental discussions started, the key is to use them as reinforcements of the same points made in the “big talk” – the beauty of sex, the miracle of it, the importance of it, and the “specialness” of it.

Puberty Discussions

Most public elementary schools teach “maturization” classes in the fourth or fifth grade, which is another good reason for the timing of the age eight parental discussion – to get a positive foundation laid before the bricks and boards of scary and random information start flying in from every angle with every kind of twist.

School maturation and sex education classes range from straightforward and useful to absolutely awful, depending on the teacher, the school district, the curriculum, the politics, and other factors.

Base the timing of your personal puberty discussion on when maturation or elementary sex-ed classes start in your child’s school and on when you think the earliest aspects of your child’s puberty will begin. Be sure you precede and supersede both. If you have already laid the groundwork through the “big talk,” in which you mentioned the word “puberty” and explained it as the growth process that makes it physically possible for people to have sex and start babies, it is a fairly natural and rather exciting thing to watch for the right opportunities for you to elaborate.

Note: Again, actual dialogues for these discussions appear in the member section, along with an outline for helping kids to make “decisions in advance” and a section on “especially for boys” and “especially for girls.”

Phase IV: Behavior Discussions with 11-16 Year Olds

Shifting from Basics to Behavior

At this point, assuming that you’ve had the earlier discussions with your child, the facts he or she needs to know about sex are pretty well in place, and you have established a positive and upbeat attitude about the beauty and wonder of mature, committed sex. The question now is one of actual practice and behavior. With eleven to sixteen year olds in mind, the goal is teaching and encouraging sexual restraint and responsibility.

All parents want to safeguard and protect their children, and as we meet with fellow parents throughout the country, the overwhelming majority feel that abstinence, at least through the high school years, is the best kind of protection to work for and the best safeguard of a happy childhood and a good marriage and family later on.

Although they know what a challenge it is, many parents today hope for a greater degree of sexual restraint in their children than what they practiced themselves. Our children’s world is simply more dangerous than the one we

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grew up in. The stakes are higher now; they have more to lose and more to gain. There is more to worry about, more to protect from and more need for solid, lasting family commitments.

It's both harder and more essential for kids in today's world to practice sexual restraint and responsibility. So how can parents teach it and encourage it? The only way we know, other than by example, is through the honest, open communication and reasoning.

In an ideal world, all parents would have early discussions with their kids about sex, and children would grow up with a healthy attitude, practice sexual restraint and responsibility, and save intimacy for a time when they were mature and committed. In the real world, however, sex frequently happens too early, and kids as well as parents, are often left with feelings of guilt and a sense of an irrecoverable loss or an uncorrectable mistake.

Yet there is a trend right now in this country away from this kind of finalism or fatalism. The idea of starting over, sometimes called "secondary virginity" or "revirginating," is catching on with thousands of teens and thousands of families.

The thing to remember is this: If you as a parent have thought the matter through and have concluded that abstinence until maturity and commitment is best for your child, then that conclusion is equally valid whether or not your child has had previous sexual encounters. And if your child has made or can make a decision that waiting is best, that decision is valuable and useful even if there has been earlier sexual experience. The point is, we can't make decisions about or set goals for the past, only the future.

Don't spend too much time wishing you or your child had behaved differently in the past. Think instead about what is best for the present and the future. Think first about your child's protection if he or she is sexually active, but if you now believe that the best and most complete protection is abstinence, set that as your goal and work toward it. Be realistic and understand that changing an attitude or a behavior pattern is more difficult than building one from scratch, but be assured that it can be done.

If you have already progressed through some of the discussions suggested here only to find that your child, previously or recently, has had sexual experience, simply reassure him or her that everything you have talked about is still valid and that while it may be harder, he can start over. Then redouble your efforts to open up the subject and to help your child make reasoned, informed decisions about what is best for his life and for his future.

Note: Go the members site for dialogue discussions on [Helpful Metaphors](#), [Pornography and Media Images](#), [Channeling and Transforming Sexual Thoughts](#), [Waiting on Dating](#), and an essay on ["Recreation or Consummation."](#)

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Welcome to the special “members section” on How to Talk to Your Kids About Sex. As is the pattern with all of valuesparenting.com the general information is in the free site and additional details and specifics are here in the members section for parents who want “the whole nine yards.”

When it comes to How to Talk to Your Kids About Sex, the “details” are mostly in the form of actual dialogues to help you have the best possible talks with your children on this all important subject.

Phase I: Preliminary “As Needed” Talks with 3-8 Year Olds

Awe and Wonder in Nature

Appreciation and love for the miraculous creations of the earth have everything to do with the groundwork needed to have a successful first discussion with your child on the most amazing, powerful, miraculous thing in the world – the process of bringing a new child into it. Look for the opportunity to have frequent little discussions like the following:

DIALOGUE:

Wow, Tom. Come out here on the balcony and look at this amazing sunset!

Tom: I'm right in the middle of a computer game.

Guess what, Tommy! This big surprise that nature has provided outside right this very minute is more fantastic than anything you will ever see on a computer! I need a friend to enjoy it with. You're so good at noticing colors and beautiful things in nature. I want you to come and tell me what you see! That game will still be there a few minutes from now, but this sunset will happen only once. Let's go!

OR:

Hey, Jill. Do you notice anything different in our backyard?

Jill: No.

Well, the oak tree is just starting to turn slightly green and get little buds. It's gorgeous. When you go out today, see what else you can notice and tell me about it when I get home from work, okay?

Your enthusiasm and positive attitude will heighten your child's awareness. Take the opportunity to point out the beauties that you see in the colors, contrasts, shading, and textures as you experience nature with your children on walks, bike rides, campouts, and hikes. Your observations will make them think and will stimulate them to think of their pleasure as they observe nature. When your child is seven, you can turn your comments on nature into anticipation builders for the big talk, such as:

Jill, when we go out for our special talk on your eighth birthday, we're going to tell you about something that has to do with nature. But it's even more amazing than the beautiful things you always notice about the trees and rocks, plants and animals. Do you realize that everything in nature is absolutely unique? No two leaves are alike, even on the same tree. Every flower is different from any other flower. No two people are alike, either, and that's part of what we'll talk about when you're eight. Nature is truly awesome!

Modesty in Dress and Appearance

Modesty is sort of an old-fashioned word. It is not used much any more and belongs in the same category as chastity --something straight out of a Charlotte Bronte novel. It is not even in the vocabulary of a modern preadolescent anymore, right? Certainly, the part about the word not being in our preadolescent's vocabulary is true. And in our conversations with our young daughters, "What do you think about modesty?" is just not up there with, "Is your room clean?" and "Is your homework done?" Yet parents have to be concerned as their children walk out the door dressed in a way that leaves little to the imagination or with a new hole pierced somewhere in their bodies.

Once again, timing is crucial. The time to talk to your daughter about caring for her body, the implications and significance of what she wears, and treating her body with respect is not on the day she comes home with a new tattoo on her shoulder. Start with preschoolers, kindergarteners, and first graders. Having "modesty" conversations with young children can guide their thinking about what clothes they will choose and how they are going to deal with their bodies as they mature. Even if friends try and sometimes succeed in influencing your child's decisions about dress and conduct, your preliminary talks are the best anchor as your child sets goals and makes decisions concerning standards.

DIALOGUE:

Hillary, I can't believe how nice you look today. You are growing up! Before you know it, you'll be a teenager. Are you looking forward to that time?

Response.

What do you think it will be like to be a teenager?

Hillary: I don't know.

What kind of a teenager do you want to be?

Hillary [help and clues]: I want to be happy, do well in school, and so forth.

If you could be just like a teenager you know right now, who would it be?

Response. (Hope that your child chooses someone with admirable personality traits. She may also choose the opposite. In either case, probe the answer. Ask what she likes about this person. If she can't think of anyone, suggest a sister or a cousin or neighbor who you think she might admire and talk about what you both like about that person.)

There are so many exciting things about being a teenager, but there are a few dangers too that you should be thinking about a little bit. There are some pretty crazy teenagers in this world. Most of them are trying to make a statement about how they feel about the world. They show it in the way they dress and the way they act. Some kids, even when they're just a little older than you, wear things that are very strange, wouldn't you agree?

Response.

You have been given a very special body. It does amazing things for you, and you need to take good care of it. Sometimes kids forget how important it is to use their body wisely and take good care of it. They see things on TV and in movies that makes them think that the most important thing in the world is to look beautiful or grown-up. They start thinking that a good way to get a boyfriend is to wear clothes that are short and tight and show off their bodies. They think that the only way people are going to think that they're cool is if they have great looking bodies. Many of them think they are fat, even when they aren't a bit fat, and they start doing crazy things to their bodies to make themselves look like they think others want them to look. That's kind of sad, isn't it?

Response.

Hillary, because I love you so much, I don't want you to have to worry about some of the hard things in life that happen if you don't take care of your body. Some girls think that the way to look beautiful is to wear very short skirts and tight-fitting clothes, and that they would look even more beautiful if they pierced

their navel or nose or other parts of their bodies and wore rings in them. Some think a tattoo would make them more beautiful. Others think that wearing lots of makeup will make them appear cool or help get them lots of dates. How about you? Do you think you'd want to have friends who like the *outside* of you -- what you wear or how you look -- or do you think you'd like to have friends who like the *inside* of you . . . your personality?

Hillary: I'd want them to like the real me -- who I am inside.

Me too! Our bodies *are* an important part of us, but we don't need to show them off. We need to take good care of them. You need to feed your body good food because a strong body is one of life's most priceless possessions. If you take care of it properly, you'll be able to use your body to do the things you really want to do. It is useful for everything from walking through the halls at school to participating in sports. So how important is it to take really good care of our bodies?

Hillary: Really important.

Let's compare your body to a car for a minute because a good car can get you where you want to go and help you have fun, just like a good body. What's the coolest kind of a car? What car would you like if you could have whichever one you wanted?

Response. (Hillary may name a specific car, or she may say something as simple as "a fast new red one." Assume she says, "a Porsche.")

Okay, now let's say you just put a lot of stickers on that Porsche and decorated it and parked it in front of the house and bragged about it all the time and showed off in it by driving way too fast. Would this be good?

Hillary [help and clues]: No, it would look worse if I did too many things to it. It's dangerous to drive too fast, and if I just showed it off all the time, people would just think of me as my car instead of knowing me for myself.

Right. Exactly. Now what if you had that same car but you just took really good care of it, kept it clean, changed the oil, parked it in the garage (where no one would see it but it would be really safe), and never bragged about it or showed it off. Would that be better?

Response.

Hillary, how is your body like that beautiful car?

Hillary [help and clues]: It's better to take care of it and keep it clean than to show it off and try to decorate it or change it too much. It's good to keep clothes on it so others don't see it too much and so they won't think of my body but my real self.

Respecting and Protecting Our Bodies

As parents, we should look for a good balance between telling our pre-eight children too much about sex and their bodies and telling them too little. We want them to know enough to appreciate and respect their physical capacities and to protect themselves from any kind of sexual harm, yet we don't want to worry or frighten them in any way or to create any kind of negative attitude.

During their early elementary school years and before the "big talk," parents should look for opportunities to help children both respect and protect their bodies . . . all in the positive context of appreciating and caring for their marvelous physical gifts. Sexual dangers should be brought up very carefully and with much emphasis on the fact that a very small percentage of people would ever hurt a child and that the vast majority of adults would help and protect a child.

DIALOGUE:

Adam, your body is one of the most amazing possessions you have. Aren't the things that it can do incredible? What are some of the things your body can do?"

Adam: Eat, run, swim, play the piano, jump.

Good, Adam. The thing you want to remember is that our bodies are miracles. They can do so many things. Every part of our bodies and everything our bodies can do is a gift that we should be thankful for! What are some parts of your body that you're thankful for?

Adam: Eyes, ears, mouth, legs.

There are some parts of our bodies that we call private parts because they are so special that we keep them private rather than showing them to everyone. What are some of your private parts?

Adam [help, clues]: penis, bottom, testicles.

Good, and what private parts do girls have?

Adam [help, clues]: Breasts, vagina.

You know, Adam, it's amazing how many names these private parts have. And the things we do with these private parts also have a lot of names. Some of the names are just cute words that families sometimes use. (Discuss words you use for bodily parts and bodily functions.) You're old enough now, Adam, to know and use the real words for all these things, the correct words that we've been using in this talk we're having. Why do you think it's a good idea to use the correct words?

Adam [clues and help]: The right words show respect for our bodies.

Right. You know, Adam, lots of kids (and grownups too) don't understand how important their bodies are, so they don't take very good care of them. What's the problem with that?

Adam: They're more likely to get sick or hurt and they won't have as much joy from their bodies.

Also, some kids don't appreciate how cool their bodies are. They like to say disgusting things about the functions of the body. For some reason they think it's really funny to make jokes about private parts of the body or urinating or having bowel movements (use whatever words you and your child feel comfortable with), and they use words that sound kind of gross and almost make you think that there's something weird about some parts of your body or some of the things your body does. Have you heard any words that sounded rude or crude to you?

Response, discussion.

Adam, when you hear a word that you think has to do with our private parts, always tell me so we can talk about what it means, okay?

Adam: Okay.

A lot of kids use the wrong words because they don't know the right words. Since we know the right words, we'll use them. If we want, we can still use our family words for our private parts and for what they do, but let's not use the gross words, okay?

Adam: Okay.

Now here's something else you're getting old enough to know, Adam. Some of our private parts can do other things besides helping us go to the bathroom -- amazing, awesome things that help us have babies! And guess what? When you turn eight we're going to have a really special, really grown-up talk about this

and you will be amazed at what a fantastic thing grownups can do with their private parts.

If Adam says, "Why can't you tell me now?" indicate that you want it to be a special surprise for his eighth birthday.

Now Adam, we don't let people who aren't in our family see or touch our private parts because they are so special. You understand that, right?

Adam: Right.

In our family Adam, when someone hugs you or kisses you or holds your hand, how does it feel?

Adam: Good.

It sure does! That's called good touching. How about when your friend pats you on the back or puts his arm around you and says "good job" after you kicked a goal in soccer -- does that feel good?

Adam: Yes.

Sure it does. When friends or family or people we love hug us or pat us or put their arm around us, that is good touching. Now let me ask you, is there such a thing as bad touching?

Adam: If someone tried to touch your private parts?

Right. That would be a bad touch. What other kind of touch might not feel good?

Adam: If a stranger puts his arm around you or patted you.

Exactly, Adam. These are bad touches. If anyone ever tries to touch you in a bad way, what should you do?

Adam [help, clues]: Yell PLEASE DON'T TOUCH ME! really loudly, and then come to me right away and tell me about it.

Good, Adam. You'll have thousands of good touches from family and friends and people who love you, and you'll probably never have a bad touch. But if you ever do, you know what to do, right?

A Fable (Bedtime Story) to Prepare Your Child for “The Big Talk”

The Marriage Roses

Adapted by Marvin Payne from an episode of “Alexander’s Amazing Adventures” by Marvin Payne, Steven Kapp Perry, and Roger and Melanie Hoffman

Once upon a time, there was a little boy named Alexander and a little girl named Elinor who were good friends. But they didn’t play together every day, because they lived in two very different places. Alexander lived on a street a lot like yours and mine, in a town that looked a lot like where you and I live. But Elinor lived in an old and magical place called Inland, a place like we can only find in well-worn storybooks. In Inland, boys wore pointy hats with feathers stuck in them, and girls wore brightly colored dresses all the time. But both boys and girls wore tall boots and warm capes, because the mountains and forests of Inland were full of adventures.

Elinor never came to where you and I and Alexander live, but every now and then, when the wind was blowing just the right song, and the clouds for a moment slipped into just the right shape, and the light sparkled through the dust in the air with just the right color, Alexander would look around and find himself suddenly standing in Inland! And before too many minutes passed, Elinor would come from behind a tree, or over a hill, or just walk up behind him and say, pretty loudly, “Hi. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Elinor? Hey, where am I? And what’s this in my hand?”

“Punch, silly. It’s what we drink at weddings.”

“Am I at a wedding? Who’s getting married?”

“My cousin Elaine and her handsome sweetheart, Edgar.”

Just then they heard the noise of three big drums booming, and a whole bunch of little pipes tweetling up a slow marching tune that made Alexander feel hushed and happy and a little bit frightened all at the same time. Elinor whispered, “They’re starting the march to the garden.”

Now Alexander watched as the marriage march progressed toward the garden. Elaine and Edgar looked splendid, but Alexander was a little puzzled, because nobody had ever told him about how Inlanders get married. So as he watched, Elinor tried to explain as best she could how in Inland the bride and groom lead a long march to their own marriage garden. Alexander could see the

little parade heading toward some stone walls down in the meadow, and he wondered what magical things might happen inside those walls. Elinor told him that the bride and groom would go inside, just the two of them, and plant two rose seeds, one from her parents' garden and one from his parents' garden. There had to be two seeds, because these weren't going to be ordinary roses. They were marriage roses, the most beautiful and magical flowers of all.

In Inland, the new husband and wife spend some time together every day taking care of what they have planted in their own secret garden. Soon, two tender green shoots peek up through the earth, and as they grow up toward the sunshine they curl and twine around each other. They grow like one stem, but twice as tall and strong. After a good long time, one rose blooms. As long as the husband and wife weed and water and enjoy it and treat it tenderly, the bloom lasts, and the sweetness deepens.

And the color keeps on changing! When the husband and wife are laughing, the rose glows yellow. When they hope for something good to happen, it trembles orange, like an ember about to burst into flame. When they cry together, it darkens to purple and blue, and when they are happy it pulses ruby red.

And there's even more magic! When it hears the music of the man and the woman singing together, the rose changes from gold to silver and back again, over and over, faster and faster until it shimmers white, flashing out every color in the song, like sunlight on water.

Just then somebody screamed as Elaine fainted and fell flat on the grass. Edgar swept her up into his arms, and Alexander and Elinor hurried along behind as he carried her quickly home to her cottage, with Alexander and Elinor hurrying along behind. As he laid her down on the pillow, he slipped off of her head a circle of roses she had been wearing, like a crown. The whole room was heavy with the smell of dying roses, gifts from Edgar to Elaine. Roses hung from the door posts and windowsills, and leaned out of huge vases on the table and by Elaine's bed. Suddenly she sneezed loudly, like a little explosion, and moaned.

Elinor whispered to Alexander, "Something's funny here."

"Funny? That didn't sound to me like laughing."

"No, I mean, all these roses look like marriage roses."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Well, you would never cut a marriage rose from its garden and take it somewhere else."

“Elinor, I think we should stop talking about flowers and try to find a cure for Elaine.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her out the door and ran with her off through the woods.

“Where are we going?”

“Look! Through the trees! A medicine wagon!”

In Inland, horses pull medicine wagons from village to village, and the medicine men stop for a while near each village and sell not only cures for bellyaches and blisters and bald heads, but also bonnets and buttons and butterfly nets. It looked like this one was selling flowers.

“Don’t push! Don’t shove! Get your marriage roses! Plenty for everybody!”

Elinor couldn’t believe her ears! Selling marriage roses? She’d never heard of such a thing! The medicine-man rattled on, “All the marriage roses you’ll ever want, without the bother of finding a husband or wife and fussing around for years in some damp garden!”

Alexander didn’t like the look of the medicine man. He was a little too tall, a little too thin; his moustache was a little too pointy, and his hair just a little too shiny. He stood on the back of his wagon, surrounded by bundles of roses, and shouted answers down to the people crowding below, each one holding out a fistful of coins.

“What? You want one like the first one you bought? Sorry, they’re all different. Don’t you know variety is the spice of life? You sir -- back again, I see. What can I do for you?”

The young customer burst out with “ahh-choo!” and Elinor saw that it was Edgar!

“I’ll take, ahh-choo, a dozen yellow ones.”

“Edgar! What are you doing here?”

“Buying roses for Elaine. She’s awfully sick, and these cheer her up.”

Elinor looked at the roses. “But they’re fading already!” and Alexander said, “She had a roomful of them, why does she need more?”

“They die quickly. Ah, ah, ah, ahh-choo!!! I’d better hurry back with these!” And Edgar ran off toward Elaine’s bedside, scattering sickly rose petals behind

him. Almost as soon as the petals touched the ground, they withered like little bits of dusty paper.

Something about that sneeze made Alexander very suspicious, and he slipped off quietly toward the medicine wagon. Elinor felt as though the sky were suddenly flat and grey and empty of birds. She slowly walked a few steps down the path that Edgar had taken. Lying off to the side was a rose that had slipped out of the bundle. Elinor picked it up and took a big, deep sniff.

Alexander, all this time, was tiptoeing around behind the medicine wagon, trying to peek inside. “Whatcha lookin’ for?” said a great big wheezy voice. Alexander spun around. Nobody was there! “Broof! Ka-ka-broof!” It sounded to Alexander as though an enormous horse had sneezed – which is exactly what had happened! Alexander had forgotten that certain animals in Inland could talk, and here was the medicine man’s horse talking to Alexander! “Well, I, uh . . .” mumbled Alexander. The horse just said, “Hope it’s not roses. Ka-broof!” He sneezed again. “The medicine-man has so many he just feeds the extras t’ me, instead of lettin’ me munch on good green grass. I think there must be somethin’ wrong with ‘em, ‘cause I’m getting sick eatin’ em.”

“Where does he get them all?” asked Alexander.

“Oh, he’s planted a big farm o’ stolen marriage roses. People buy ‘em cause they don’t want t’ grow their own. Course they got t’ buy lots of ‘em ‘cause they die quick.”

An idea was flaming up like a candle inside Alexander’s head. Right then he heard a loud sneeze from off in the woods. He ripped up a big thistle out of the ground and held it out for the horse to eat. “Here, and thanks!” The horse blew his lips out in a big smile and said, “Oh no! Thank you!” But Alexander was already running away as fast as he could toward his sneezing friend.

“Ah-choo!!!” Elinor shook all over, and the rose in her hand quivered at the sound.

Alexander came running from behind the noisy crowd and shouted, “Elinor! Drop that rose!”

“Ah-choo!!! Why?”

“It’s poison!”

“Ah-choo!!! Poison?”

Alexander grabbed it away and threw it as far as he could.

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Elinor yelled, "And Edgar's taking Elaine even more of them!"

Fairly flying through the woods after Edgar, Alexander had barely enough breath to gasp out his story to Elinor.

"Talking ... to the horse ... medicine man wasn't looking. ... Roses are marriage roses ... stolen and planted on a big farm. ... Sell lots of them because they die so quickly. ... Feeds them to the horse, even.... That's why he talked to me. ... Tired of eating poison roses ... wants grass instead. ... People think they can have marriage roses for a few coins. ... Don't want to grow just one that will last. ... Don't know they're poison when they're cut away . . . from their ... roots."

Soon they were crashing through the cottage door. Edgar jumped up from Elaine's bedside. "Please! Quiet! Someone's sick in here!" Alexander and Elinor began scooping the flowers up in huge armfuls and throwing them outside.

"Elinor, what are you doing with her beautiful roses?"

"Edgar, these are poison!"

"What do you mean?"

"When you cut marriage roses from their roots, they're poison!"

"But she loves them!"

And a weak little cry came from the bed. "Yes, I love them!"

"You'll like the living ones more!" And Elinor threw a stack of dead stems to Alexander at the door, and he tossed them far into the yard. "Living roses won't hurt you! Wouldn't you let these go, if it meant getting well and having the real thing?"

Edgar reached for Elaine's pale hand, and they looked deep into each other's eyes before they answered with one voice: "Of course. That's what we've always wanted!" And Edgar saw in her eyes the tall walls and cool shadows of a secret garden, and she saw in his the beautiful thorny arm of wood that would someday raise one perfect blossom high against the sun.

And they were still looking into each other's eyes when Alexander, still at the door, heard the wind blow, looked up and saw the clouds move, and perceived a certain light through the dust in the air. He quickly looked back inside the cottage. For just an instant he thought he saw everybody smiling at

him, as though he had done something really quite wonderful! But then they disappeared, and he was home.

Phase II: The Big Talk

Preparation Dialogue

A couple of months ahead of the eighth birthday, start having discussions like the following:

DIALOGUE:

Jason, you are getting old enough to understand some really important things, so when you turn eight on your birthday next month, we are going to let you in on a very exciting secret. In fact, we're going to tell you about the most wonderful and awesome thing in the world.

Jason: What is it?

Respond with something like: Oh, we can't give you any clues. You'll have to wait until your birthday. But I can tell you this: I'm excited because this is really something fantastic, and it's going to be such fun to tell you about it.

Jason: Well, just tell me what it's about.

No, that would be too much of a clue. We want this to be kind of like a secret until you turn eight. You probably know a little about the thing we're going to talk about, but on your birthday we're going to share the whole secret. And it is really wonderful, really incredible! I can hardly wait. Let's figure out exactly how long it is until you turn eight.

Jason: I think it's about four more weeks.

The Big Talk

Here is a suggested dialogue.

DIALOGUE:

Well, Kathy, we told you this talk would be about the most wonderful, amazing, beautiful, awesome thing on earth. Are you excited?



Kathy responds. Be positive and encouraging about every answer; make the child feel important and special.

Before we start, we just want to tell you how much we love you. You already know that, but do you really know how much we love you? Do you know we love you way more than our jobs or our car or our house or any of our friends? We love you more than anything, except maybe each other -- did you know that?

Response.

And that's one reason we're excited to tell you this fantastic secret. Because it's about love and it's about you! Does that give you any clues?

Response. If Kathy has asked some earlier questions that you've deferred, refer to them and let her know that this talk is about the answers.

Actually what we've been telling you for weeks is a clue -- that this was going to be about something really amazing and awesome. What do you think is the most awesome thing on earth?

Let her mention some things -- all answers are good.

Yes, an airplane is pretty awesome. What can it do? A whale? Yes -- why? When a person is mentioned say: Now I think we're getting the best answer. Why is a person the most awesome thing of all?

Response. Discuss all the things body and mind can do.

Okay, if a person is the most awesome thing, then the most awesome secret would be how a person gets made. Let's think about that. We're all big now, but what did we all start out as? What were we when we were just born?

Kathy: Babies.

Have you seen a baby lately? Did he have all his parts -- fingers, toes, little eyelashes, a little belly button?

Response.



Babies are pretty amazing, aren't they! We remember so well when you were a little tiny baby. You were so cute and so special. And you had all your parts. You just had to grow bigger to become you. Do you remember when you were a baby?

Response.

Now here's the big question, Kathy. Where do you think babies come from?

The hospital.

Yes, but how do they get there?

Mommy's tummy.

Yes, but how did the baby get in Mommy's tummy?

Response: (Child may say, "From God" or "From a little seed.")

Good, but do you have any idea how that little body got started in there? (Ask each question with awe and excitement, not as a test or a quiz. Respond positively to each answer by repeating it and seeing if the child will go on. Then, when the response runs down, start a slightly different line of questions.) Who do you think should become parents? What kind of people would be the best parents?

Kathy [help, clues]: People who love kids and take care of them.

Why would that be important?

Kathy: Kids need love and a loving family.

Would it be important for a baby's mom and dad to love each other?

Yes, very important.

How do you show someone you love them?

Tell them, do nice things for them.



Can you show someone you love them physically -- with your body, with your arms or your lips?

You can kiss or hug.

Exactly. And if a man and woman are falling love with each other, what kind of kissing might they do?

Kathy [help, clues]: Longer, more romantic kisses on each other's lips.

Good Kathy. Now, did you know there is an even bigger, better kind of hug that a husband and a wife can do? It makes each of them feel really good and really loved *and* -- this is the most exciting part -- this special kind of a big hug is what can get a baby to start growing inside the mom. Isn't *that* exciting?

Response.

Now, we've got a book here with pictures and everything. It shows about the special big hug that mommies and daddies can have and about how it starts babies, and about how those babies grow inside their moms. Are you ready?

Yes.

Let's have you read it and we'll stop and talk about things as we go along, okay? Isn't this exciting?

(Read the book. If the child is a comfortable reader, let her read. If not, you read, or perhaps alternate. Go slowly; frequently ask what she thinks. Answer questions as they come up. Emphasize at every opportunity how amazing, how beautiful, how marvelous it all is.)

How did you like that, Kathy?

(Some children think the pictures in some of the recommended books are a little bit comical, but emphasize how "awesome" the actual process is. Be personal about how much it lets you show your love and how private and wonderful it is when you save it for just one special person. And isn't it amazing that a whole baby -- a whole person -- grows from just that one tiny cell?)



Did you know any of that before?

Response.

Which parts?

Response.

What have you heard about sex?

Response.

Do you think your friends know about very much of this?

Response.

Sometimes when kids haven't learned about sex from their parents -- maybe they've just heard stuff on TV or from their friends -- they only know parts of it, and they really don't know how awesome or how special it is. So they sometimes joke about it or make fun of it, but it's just because they don't know all the things you know now. So when you hear something silly or weird about sex, just be glad you know the real truth about it. You can always come and tell me if you hear something you don't understand, okay?

Kathy: Okay.

How old do you think you have to be to have sex?

Response.

(Explain that puberty is something that happens "to kids a little older than you." It makes people grow bigger and stronger and also gets their bodies ready to have babies. Promise that you'll have another talk soon -- about puberty -- about the amazing changes and good things "that will happen to you as you go from being a girl to being a woman" (or a boy to a man).

Even if a boy and girl had gone through puberty and are big enough to have a baby, do you think they should?

Kathy: No.



Why not?

Kathy: They're too young. They're not old enough to start a baby, or to take care of one.

And do you think, with something this special, it might be better to wait and have sex with just the one person you love most -- like your own husband or wife?

Kathy: Yes.

Why?

Response.

Do you think the big, awesome kind of hug we talked about is pretty important and pretty special?

Response.

So would you want to do it with a lot of people or just with one really special person?

Kathy: One really special person.

Kathy, remember that when we started, we said this would be a talk about love and about you?

Kathy: Yes.

Well, some day *you* will fall in love with someone and want to be with him all the time, and you'll want to share all your love with that person. Do you think it would be a good idea to save that big special hug -- as you know, the short name for it is "sex"-- for someone totally special?

Kathy: Yes.

So do I! We love you so much and it's because of this wonderful thing called sex that you will someday have a child that you'll love as much as we love you. Maybe when your little son or daughter is eight, you'll have this kind of talk with him or her. Do you think so?



Response.

Kathy, you'll hear a lot about sex in the next few years. Some of it will be good, but some will be pretty mixed up since a lot of people don't know the awesome stuff we've told you today. Anytime you hear anything that bothers you or makes you have a question in your mind, ask us and we'll give you the answer. Will you do that?

Kathy: Okay.

The big special hug is called lots of things. Probably the best one is "making love," because two people should really, really love each other before they do it, and it's a way of making the other person know how much you love him. Sometimes the big special hug is called "having sex." Sometimes it's called some pretty silly and dirty names like "screwing" or a word that we call the "f" word because we don't even like to say it. Have you heard any of those words? How did they make you feel?

(If child says yes and something similar to "kind of weird," say something like:) Usually people who use those words aren't really thinking about how beautiful and awesome sex should be. And when kids use those other words, they're just trying to sound grownup or cool, or maybe they just haven't been told about all the things we've told you about.

So, Kathy, when you hear words like that in music or on TV or from other kids, just realize they're probably not thinking about what it means, that they might not know about all the good stuff.

Why would it be kind of bad for you to use words like that?

Kathy [help, clues]: Because I know the real words and because I know sex is too beautiful and special to make fun of or tell weird jokes about or even to use disrespectful words when we talk about it.

Now, "making love" or "having sex" doesn't always start a baby, but it should always show how much a man and woman love each other, and it shouldn't happen unless they are committed and loyal to each other. Do you know what those two words mean? What do you think loyal means?"

Kathy [help and clues]: Caring about someone, supporting them, keeping promises.



What do you think commitment means?

Kathy [help and clues]: Being true to someone. Loving the person more than anyone else. Staying with the person. [Help her see that marriage is all about loyalty and commitment, and that the best way to show loyalty and commitment is through marriage.]

Why would it be a bad idea to have sex with someone you didn't feel committed and loyal to?

Kathy [help and clues]: It's just too special. If you did it with other people, it wouldn't be as special with the one you loved most. You wouldn't be loyal or committed to the one you loved.

Right. One other bad thing about having sex with just anyone is that there are some pretty bad sicknesses that people can catch. Have you heard of AIDS? (Explain as much as you think is appropriate, but don't go too far or cause worry or fear. Continue to get back to the essence -- that sex, unless misused, is the most beautiful and awesome thing and that the reason for saving it is because it is so special.)

It's been so great to have this discussion with you. (Conclude with your arm around your child. Hold her close, let her feel your love.) It's great that you're old enough to know about something this awesome. It makes me feel really close to you to have this kind of talk. I think you and I could talk to each other about just about anything, don't you?

Response.

Sometimes, as kids get older, they start thinking their parents don't understand them, so they don't talk about what they're thinking or what they're worried about. Do you think that will ever happen with us?

Response.

We'll be sure it doesn't! We'll trust each other and talk about everything, especially when we're worried about something or don't understand something. That's what families are for!



Booster Discussions

Here is a suggested dialogue for two follow up discussions that can take place in the months following “The Big Talk.”

Questions and Feelings

DIALOGUE:

James, it’s been a couple of weeks since your birthday and our special date. How have you been feeling about that awesome stuff we talked about?

Response.

Isn’t it amazing how babies start and grow and become real little people inside their moms?

Response. Expand, appreciate and deal with any observation kids make or any answer they give.

And don’t you think it’s cool how the dad’s sperm and the mom’s egg get together so the baby is kind of like the mom and kind of like the dad?

Response.

The best part is that it all gets started with that big special kind of hug we talked about. What do you think about that big special hug? Does it seem pretty neat to you?

Response. It’s important to get more than one-word answers on these questions. You want to know how your child feels about what you discussed. Ask small related questions until you sense what he or she feels. If the child feels anything is strange or “gross” or “weird,” do some reassuring.

You probably feel that a little just because it’s so new to you. But as a dad (mom) let me tell you, that big hug is the greatest. It feels really good, and it lets your wife (husband) know you really love her and want to be with her for a long time. You’ll feel that some day with the person you really, really love! James, from what I’m saying, can you feel how special and cool I think it is?



Response.

You know, James, I was just wondering if, since our talk, you've heard other kids talking about sex in some way, or if you've heard or seen anything about it on TV?

Response. If James has heard something "dirty" or "weird" at school or from peers, carry on as follows.

You know James, kids who don't know all that stuff we talked about just don't understand how wonderful and awesome sex can be. Since they only know parts of it, they can be a little confused and think sex is gross or weird. If they knew all that you do, do you think they would think it was cool and awesome?

James: Probably.

And then they wouldn't tell jokes or be silly or laugh about it, would they?

James: No.

(If child has seen something on TV, ask him to explain what happened and to say whether he thought it was good or bad. Depending on what it was, what the child thought, and what your objective is, say something like:)

You know, one problem with TV or movies is that they sometimes show sex happening too soon, before people are really in love and really committed and loyal to each other. What is the problem with this?

James responds. Help him get back to the idea that it should be saved for someone really special -- when there is commitment. Perhaps it didn't show how those people might feel the next day or in a year, or if one of them got sick, or if a baby started to grow, and so forth.

James, you'll hear a lot about sex in the next few years -- from your friends, on TV, in movies, in music. Some of it will be pretty mixed up and sometimes you'll hear words and things you've never heard and don't understand. Always come and tell me what you hear and we can have these special talks about it -- just you and me -- so you'll understand everything. Okay?

James: Okay.



How much do you think your friends know about what we talked about on your birthday?

James responds. Help him to see that different families talk or don't talk in different ways, but in this family we always try to be honest and open and talk about everything!

Family (our family now and your family later)

Whenever possible, in our discussions with our children, we should connect sex with family. Children can understand quite readily and quite naturally that sex is best (and most natural, and most important, and most special) when it happens within marriage. They can also learn that saving sex can make families stronger. One discussion approach follows:

DIALOGUE:

Harmon, who are the most important people in the world to you?

Harmon: My family and my friends.

Good. Who are the people you probably love the most in the whole world?

Harmon: The people in my family.

Can you imagine ever loving anyone even more than your brother or your mom or dad?

Harmon: No.

But you know, someday you'll probably have a wife and children, and believe it or not, in some ways you'll love them even more. You'll have two families. The family you have now *and* the family you'll have then. Now Harmon, what does sex have to do with families?

Harmon [help and clues]: It's how babies get started in families.

Right -- anything else?

Harmon [help and clues]: It's how couples show their love -- they show that they love one person more than anyone else.



Harmon, how long do you think a family should last?

Harmon: As long as possible.

Why?

Harmon: Because we need families; we need their love.

We do! Now divorce comes into many families, and people get separated by where they're living or what they're doing. But we're always linked to our families, aren't we? Especially to our own parents and our own children and our own husband or wife if we're married. How long can these relationships last, do you think?

Harmon: All our lives. Forever, I guess.

Can sex have anything to do with how long a family lasts?

Harmon: I don't know.

Let's think about it. If a married couple only had sex with each other, would it help their marriage feel safe and loyal and committed so it would last?

Harmon: Yes.

And what would be the opposite of that?

Harmon [help and clues]: If they had sex with other people, they could lose that feeling. They wouldn't trust each other, and maybe the marriage wouldn't last.

That's right. Do you know what it's called when two married people love only each other and only make love with each other?

Harmon [help and clues]: Being faithful or having fidelity. [Be sure he also knows what these words mean. Also introduce the words "loyalty" and "commitment" and what they mean in this setting.]

Right, being *faithful* or having *fidelity*. So what do those words mean?

Harmon: Only having sex with each other.



Harmon, it's the happiest and the safest way to live. That's how I hope it is for you, because I love you and I want you to be the happiest you can be. Do you think that sounds pretty important -- to be faithful to your wife once you find her and marry her?

Harmon: Yes.

Now here's a hard question, Harmon. Do you think you could be faithful to your wife before you married her; before you even know who she is?

Harmon: I don't know. How?

Well, there's an interesting song about that [from Alexander's Amazing Adventures]. Here, let's read the words to it out loud and see if you know what it means:

Faithful to a Dream

Where in the world, where can she be?
Maybe she's out there, dreaming of me.
Wondering my name,
The things that I do,
All of the things I wonder, too.

Faithful to a dream,
Faithful to someone I've never seen.
Someone who's out there, trying to be
Faithful, faithful to me.

What do you think that means?

Harmon [help and clues]: I guess you can have a dream of the kind of person you want to marry and be faithful to that dream even before you meet that person.

Why would that be good?

Harmon [help and clues]: It would make your marriage last longer?

Probably. Why?



Harmon: Sex would be more special and more beautiful and awesome, and you would trust each other more.

That's a good dream, isn't it Harmon!

Making Decisions in Advance

We have one particular seminar discussion that we love to present to older kids (fifth or sixth grade) at elementary schools and middle schools. You can adapt it into a point-by-point dialogue with your child. The sequence goes something like this:

1. As young as you are, and given our ongoing medical advances, your life expectancy is somewhere around eighty-four years. That means you will live seven life segments of twelve years each.
2. All of you are just starting (or about to start) the "second seventh" of your life. In your first seventh you went through your childhood and through elementary school.
3. Now, what do you think are the most important decisions you will make during your whole life?

(The first answers are usually what profession to have, whom to marry, college -- whether to go, where to go, what to major in, where to live. Then a slightly different type of decision usually comes up: whether to do drugs, whether to be honest, whether to smoke, whether to have sex, whether to really apply myself and do one's best.)

4. It's interesting that there are two kinds of decisions here. There's the multi-alternative kind, which we can't make until we get a little older and know all the options, like whom to marry or what profession to pursue. Let's call these "category one decisions." The other type of decision is the "right-or-wrong" kind, just two alternatives -- and one is right and the other is wrong. Let's call these "category two decisions."
5. Now let's go back to the thought about the sevenths of life. Here's the big question: In which seventh of life do we make most of life's most important decisions, category one and category two? (Kids realize quickly that virtually all of their most important decisions, the ones with the longest-lasting



consequences, will likely be made in the second seventh -- the twelve-year period they are entering.)

6. Isn't that a little scary? You're so young in the second seventh but you have to make the decisions that will determine how healthy, how successful, and how happy you'll be for the other five sevenths!
7. There is a way that you can make all of the important category two decisions (the right-or-wrong ones) now, or in the next few days -- and make right decisions on them. Then you'll never have to worry about them again, and you can save your energy and thought for the other important ones -- the category one decisions -- where you'll have to think through lots of alternatives.
8. Here's how you do it. In a very special, very private place, like the back of your journal or diary, make up a list called Decisions in Advance. These are decisions where you can figure out right now what is right and what is wrong, and if you decide strongly enough and write that decision down, date it, and sign it, it can be like a contract and a promise to yourself. Any decision you write down there and sign is made, and you won't ever have to decide it again. For example, if you decide (totally firmly, in advance, and in writing) that you won't do drugs, then you don't have to keep making that decision whenever someone offers them to you.

Most early adolescent kids, even in a large group setting, with a little help and encouragement can make a solid list of six or eight decisions in advance. In the more intimate setting of a family, with a parent's help, even stronger advance commitments can be made. These decisions can involve anything from "not smoking" to "going to college." Parents can make up little case studies or scenarios to firm up the advance decisions ("You're fifteen, and you're at a party where everyone is smoking. Even the girl you're there with is trying to get you smoking. What will you do? What will you say?") This kind of dress rehearsal prepares a child for the real event.

Decisions in Advance can be particularly useful (and powerful) with regard to sex. A young child who "gets it" about "the most beautiful, wonderful thing in the world" will want to make a decision to save sex for a time of true love and long-term commitment. Once this advance decision is written and signed in the child's private journal, it can be "revisited" as years go by, and a parent can reinforce it through praise and perhaps through presenting scenarios about situations and helping him rehearse what he would say or do.

