

Talking to your children about sexual health

Children have a right to a healthy rewarding life and to an education that helps them to develop into healthy adults. This right applies to sexual health education as well.

As parents, you are the primary educators of your children and the home is considered to be the most significant place to learn about sexual health. If you build a trustful relationship with your children from when they are very young, they will come to you later on in life when they start having questions or problems in their sexual lives.

Children need to know about sexuality so that:

- they feel good about their sexuality
- they learn more about their feelings
- they can cope with peer pressure
- they can take control of their lives and their relationships
- they can protect themselves from sexual abuse
- they learn how to respect themselves and others

Sexual health education involves:

- factual information about their body that encourages them to take good care of it, including the correct names of the parts of their body
- personal hygiene
- puberty
- body image
- gender and gender identity
- sexual orientation
- masturbation
- contraception
- sexually transmitted infections
- awareness about the existence of pornography
- information for them to make responsible choices, for example, deciding when to start a sexual relationship
- help them to build the confidence to respect themselves, their bodies and their friends

Some parents may question the need of talking with their children about sex. Here are a few reasons:

- Children who are well informed about sexuality do not take risks
- They build a positive attitude towards sex and sexuality
- They know and understand their own values about sex
- They develop high self-esteem
- They have the interpersonal skills such as decision making and assertiveness
- They feel a connectedness with the significant adults in their lives, their school and the community they live in.
- Children will get this information anyway, somehow or another, possibly from the wrong source

Some parents may need a cue to actually start talking to their children about sex. It is best if you try and look for moments that may trigger conversation on sex.

These may involve:

- A new pregnancy within the family. Ideally older siblings should be involved in the preparations for the coming baby.
- A friend or neighbour may be pregnant
- A pet in the household may be pregnant
- A storyline on television may include pregnancy, puberty etc
- Models on television or billboard advertising that present issues with body image

Here are some tips to help you when you decide to start talking about sex with your children:

- Do not be afraid or ashamed to talk about sex; sexual health is an integral part of our holistic health
- Be as open as you can while remaining comfortable yourself
- Be available when your child wants to talk. It may be difficult at times, but if it is impossible for you to stop and talk at that moment, give a definite time to your child to pick up the conversation once again. Then be sure you keep that appointment.
- It is advisable to start talking to your children as early as possible about sex but you need to make sure your child is ready to start

- You will know they are ready to learn more when they start asking questions, start looking shy and coy around conversations on relationships or show an interest in the opposite sex.
- It is important to include not only information, but also attitudes, opinions and values and be clear about them yourself
- Teach children the proper names of their body parts and not babyish names that could make them the laughing stock of their friends
- You may not know all the answers children ask nowadays but do not let that deter you. Just say you do not know but that you will find out.
- Studies show that young people who are informed about sexual health are less likely to experiment with sex.
- Also, studies show that children who talk to their parents about sex are less likely to start having sex at an early age.
- Remember children want to learn about sexuality from their parents and they do look up to their parents when it comes to decision making although they may not admit it.

You need to consider also:

Starting early

- Finding the right time, place and situation
- Give a little information at a time
- Let your children know you are available always
- Spend more time listening and finding out about the reality in which your children are living
- Be honest if you want them to be honest with you
- Respect their privacy
- Build their self-esteem and do not use scare tactics
- Stay connected

The Internet

Children today start looking for information on the internet from a very young age. While the internet is indeed an educational tool, it can never replace sexual health education given by a parent in a loving, caring environment.

At the same time, do not be overwhelmed by the tools that the internet offers young people today like social networking and instant messaging. Yet you may need to explain that while all this is a good thing, some people may abuse the systems available.

It is important to be aware of what your children are learning at school on Sexual Health. Sexual Health forms part of the national curriculum for schools at both primary and secondary level.

Just as important is to know what is being promoted in your community. Currently, the ABCD model is encouraged and includes:

- Abstinence: Children and young people are encouraged to abstain from having sex at an early age, outside of a stable relationship and until it is the right time for them.
- Be faithful: Being faithful does prevent sexually transmitted infections as well as emotional and psychological problems.
- Use Condoms: Condoms are not only a barrier contraceptive device but can prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections
- Do not do drugs: Injecting drugs does bring about a spread of a number of infections if needles and other equipment are shared.