

TIPS FOR ANSWERING YOUR CHILD'S QUESTIONS ABOUT SEXUALITY

OKAY!

She's asked you a question about sexuality. Now, what do you say? Here are a few tips to help out.

HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Then say that you'll find out or that the two of you can find out together (and make sure to follow up once you have the answer). Likewise, if a question makes you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed, say so. It's fine to say, "I'm a little embarrassed by that question, but I'm glad you asked, and I'll try to answer it." This lets your child know that it's OK to talk about sexuality and sex even if the question is embarrassing.

BE SURE TO TALK ABOUT YOUR OWN FEELINGS AND ATTITUDES. It's your right and responsibility to share your values and expectations with your children. Tell them what you believe and what you want for them. This doesn't mean that they will accept all of your values. Especially during adolescence, sons and daughters begin to reject some of their parents' values as they search for more independence. However, if you tell them what you believe and what you expect, they'll have a basic foundation of values to draw upon when faced with peer pressure. Encourage them to think about their own values - parents sharing their values with their children provides them with a different perspective and experience.

BE A GOOD LISTENER. When your children approach you with a question, find out what they're thinking about before you answer. Listen thoroughly before thinking about what or how to answer the question. If you're not sure what your child is really thinking, you might say, "Tell me what you think about that."

ANSWER QUESTIONS IN SIMPLE, CLEAR TERMS. Tailor your answer to your child's age or developmental level. Avoid giving overly complex or sophisticated answers. But, be sure to give your children the verbal cues they may need in order to continue asking questions. Examples of verbal clues include, "I'm glad you brought that up," "If you have any more questions, let me know and we'll talk some more," or "That was an important question. I really enjoyed talking with you."

CHECK TO SEE IF YOUR ANSWER WAS ADEQUATE. After responding to a question, you might ask, "Have I answered your question?" or "Do you understand?" Leave your child with the feeling that you're always available to answer additional questions in the future.

BUILD YOUR CHILD'S COMFORT LEVEL FOR COMING TO YOU WITH QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS. Hear her out before voicing your opinions and avoid making assumptions about what she "must" be doing based on her questions. Treat her questions as a part of normal, everyday life. While it's important to be an "askable" parent/caregiver, don't always wait for her to ask questions about sexuality.

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USE EVERYDAY OCCURRENCES TO BEGIN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SEXUALITY.

Such events include watching TV, hearing provocative lyrics in a popular song, or diapering a baby. For example, after a TV show that deals with some aspect of sexuality, you might ask, "How do you feel about that?" or "What do you think she/he should have done?" Remember to say what you think about the program as well.

IT'S OKAY TO NOT ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL SEX LIFE.

Parents/Caregivers do have the right to privacy. Besides, there is usually little need to provide details about what your current experiences are or past experiences have been.

PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:

PRACTICE RESPONDING TO THESE COMMON QUESTIONS AND REMARKS.

1. Why do girls have periods?
2. My body is going through some real changes. Why? (Answer for girls; answer for boys)
3. What's the right age to date (go out)?
4. What is the right age to have sex (sexual intercourse)?
5. How old were you when you first had sex?
6. What should I do if my boyfriend/girlfriend asks me to do "it" and I kinda' do, and I kinda' don't want to do it?
7. Is it wrong to get an abortion?
8. Which is better to use, pads or tampons?
9. Why are my breasts bigger/smaller than all my friends' breasts? (OR Why is my penis larger/smaller than my friends' penises?)
10. Why is it important to use a condom?
11. Can girls get AIDS?
12. What does it mean to be gay/lesbian/bi-sexual/transgender?
13. What is masturbation and how do you do it?
14. Kissing and touching my boyfriend/girlfriend feels great. We're in love and think the time is right for us. Why should we wait?
15. How will I know when I've met the right person for me?

Use the "tips" to help develop your responses.

If you still have trouble, especially with basic information, click on Resources.

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PARENTS/CAREGIVERS ARE SEXUALITY EDUCATORS

You are your child's PRIMARY sexuality educators. It's your right as well as your responsibility to communicate your values about sexuality, including gender expectations/roles, showing affection and sexual behavior. Still, most parents want and need help in making sure that their children have the information and skills to be sexually healthy and responsible.

Your child learns about sexuality every day. Practically from day one she learns about values, expectations, attitudes, and behaviors from you and family members. As she grows, she continues to learn from her friends, TV (comedy and drama series, the news, documentaries), culture, religion, movies and videos, music, and society in general.

Your child learns about sexuality by what you do as well as what you say. Even though little may be said, many of the things you do and how you relate to others carry messages about sexuality. Ask yourself, "Are my actions consistent with the values I hope to teach my children?"

You CAN be an effective sexuality educator. You don't have to be an expert or completely at ease with the topic of sexuality to do a good job. Listen, practice, and keep trying.

Start the discussion early and keep it going. It's best to start talking with your child about sexuality when she is very young; however, it's never too late to start. Since issues and concerns change as children get older, there is always something to talk about.

