Talking to Children about Sex and Relationships

For parents and carers with children aged between 4–10 years
Acknowledgements

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This leaflet is designed to help parents talk to primary school aged children about sex and relationships.

Why talk to children from an early age?

From a very young age children start to explore their own bodies and will begin to notice differences between themselves and others. Their natural curiosity will often lead them to ask about these differences. Talking to your children from a young age will help to build a relationship that is open and honest. Such a relationship will make it much easier to discuss questions when they are older, and also encourage them to seek your help and advice as they grow up.

Many parents say they find it difficult to talk about sex and relationships with their children. Usually this is because they are embarrassed or because they feel they won’t know the right answers to questions their children may bring up. This leaflet aims to help by providing some examples of questions that children of different ages may ask, as well as answers to them from real parents.
It's important to remember that the answers in this leaflet are by no means model answers. There is no such thing as the one perfect answer. There are many responses you can give. Think about how you would answer the questions presented in this leaflet. Would you say something differently?

Equally think about other questions your child may ask you, this will help you consider possible answers, and prevent any questions coming as a shock. It can be helpful to discuss potential questions with health or school staff or other parents, just to see how they would answer things.

The amount of detail you give in an answer will depend on the question posed and the age of your child. Often young children will be happy with a short simple answer, whereas older children will want more detailed responses. A good starting point for discussion can be asking your child "what do you know already?"

**Remember**

- Be open and honest.
- Listen and value your child's opinions.
- Don't always wait for your child to initiate conversations on sex and relationships.
- Use everyday situations to spark conversations.
- Have booklets and leaflets handy.
- Keep telling your child you love them.
- Always keep talking.
Your 8 year old says:

"What does gay mean?"

Children usually have no difficulty in accepting a variety of adult relationships. However they are sensitive to your feelings and attitudes so if this is an area where you have difficulty, you will need to think through your response carefully. Ask where your child heard the word “gay” as this is a chance to deal with any prejudice and intolerance.

**Imran** "Well, some men want to marry or live with women and some women want to marry or live with men. If you are a gay man you want to be with another man, and if you are a gay woman, you want to be with another woman. What do you think about that?"

**Katy** "Well, when you are a grown up, a man can fall in love with a woman and a woman can fall in love with a man. But "gay" is when a man falls in love with another man, and a woman falls in love with another woman. Our friends Michael and Paul are gay."

Your 10 year old sees a red ribbon for World AIDS day and asks:

"How do you get AIDS?"

Whilst most primary school aged children won't have heard of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), they may have heard the words HIV or AIDS. They may have picked up wrong ideas and prejudices about the disease and particularly about gay men.

**Alesky** "It's an illness people may get from someone if they share dirty needles or have unprotected sex without using a condom."

**Jane** "You can get AIDS, by having sex with someone who has it without using a condom. Do you understand that? There are other ways too. Do you want to know about them?"
Your 10 year old says

"How do you stop having a baby?"

This kind of question is unlikely to come from a younger child. However, children at school may have heard some things about condoms as a joke. As with other questions, it can be helpful to get an idea of what lies behind the question. You do not need to go into a very detailed explanation as if you were a family planning nurse, but a willingness to be open is helpful.

Isabelle “You use something called contraception. There are many different kinds of contraception, but if the man wears a condom, it can protect against catching infections as well as helping to avoid having a baby.”

Kwame “Well, you know how babies happen, don’t you? It is possible to stop the man’s sperm and the woman’s eggs from getting together to make a baby. There are a few different ways. One is a pill that a woman can get from her doctor. She has to take it every day and not forget. Or a man can use a condom. It’s a special cover for his penis, which catches all the sperm. It’s rubbery - a bit like a balloon! I’ll show you one.”

Your 9 year old daughter says that her best friend has just started her periods. She asks you

“When will she start? When will she get breasts?”

Girls need to be aware that it is perfectly normal for periods to start at any time between ten and fifteen years and sometimes as young as eight. (Also do not forget boys who may have their own concerns and are often left out of these particular discussions.) Children feel anxious when friends develop at different times. This is when a child needs an understanding grown up to help them.
Joseph “Everyone develops in their own time. Have you noticed any changes in your body that you want to talk about?”

Bridget “It could be any time from now on. It will almost certainly be before you are 16. It tends to be the same in families and I started when I was around 14, so you probably will too.”

Your 10 year old asks

“What does having an abortion mean?”

This is not the kind of question a younger child will ask, but an older child may hear or see the word in the media, and pick up on the controversial nature of this for some people. You need to be clear about the issue from your own moral and faith perspective - you can do this without any complicated details. You might find it useful to discuss your answer with health or school based staff.

Lijuan “Sometimes a woman decides not to have the baby after she finds out she is pregnant. Occasionally having a baby will make the woman ill or the baby growing inside the woman is very ill. The woman will go into hospital to end the pregnancy. This is known as an abortion.”

Abigail “If a woman is pregnant there can be reasons why she can’t have the baby. The operation to stop her having a baby is called an abortion.”
Your 9 year old asks

"Why do some people get married and other people do not?"

Your child will hear about many different kinds of family structures through their classmates as school. This may trigger a curiosity about these differences as your child compares themselves to others.

Naomi "There is no law that says that everyone must get married, but a lot of people want to because they feel a wedding makes being a couple more special. Some of our friends are married and some are not. People who are not married love each other just the same as people who are."

Tracey "Mostly it's a choice. Different people think different things. If people are religious, they may think it's important."

Your 3 year old is touching her genital area while sitting outside in the sun.

Your 7 year old says

"It's disgusting to touch yourself"

Many parents find talking about masturbation a tough topic, and are influenced by the messages they themselves received as a child. Small children explore their genitals from an early age as part of the normal process of development. The way you react to situations like this can be important.
You need to be able to set limits for what is private behaviour in an open and matter of fact way without any suggestion of this being 'dirty' or 'harmful.'

Maggie "It's not disgusting. It's just something big boys and girls like you, know to do in private."

Your 4 year old child asks

"Where did I come from?"

This is a classic question. Young children are usually only looking for a simple answer, whereas an older child may want a more detailed answer. Remember that a four year old will often take things quite literally, therefore it is important to consider the words you use in your answer.

Mandy "Mummy and Daddy made you. You started very small and grew in Mummy's tummy until you were big enough to come out."

Sharon "You grew inside your mummy. A baby begins to grow when an egg from Mummy and a seed from Daddy get together."

Your 7 year old daughter asks

"Am I sexy?"

From an early age young children pick up messages about what our society deems attractive from the media and people around them. This can impact children's feelings sometimes making them feel anxious and insecure. You may need to check what lies behind this question.

Aaliyah "You're too young to be sexy, but you're beautiful. Where did you hear about being sexy?"

Tom "No, but you might be seen as being sexy when you are older. Being sexy can be about the way you feel, but also about the way you make someone else feel."