

VIP Value In Parenting

Volume 5, Number 2

Spring/Summer 2003

There's No Place Like Home... (to talk about sensitive topics)

By Virginia Brown, Dispute Resolution Center; Fran Fox-Pizzonia, Director TASA/APPS; and Tina Robie, Director Education & Training PPMHV

Children are always asking questions; this is how they learn about their world. Often we are too distracted or busy to give the "right" answer. When a sensitive subject comes up, we might also be embarrassed and unsure about the best approach.

What makes a topic "sensitive"?

- ◆ One day while shopping in the mall, my 3 year old points to a woman in a wheelchair and yells, "What's the matter with her legs?"
- ◆ While attending the funeral services for my grandfather, my 4 year old daughter asks, "Why did Pop-Pop die, where did he go?"
- ◆ Just as I was tucking my 5 year old into bed, my daughter asks, "Where do babies come from?"
- ◆ As my 7 year old child gets off the school bus, I overhear him ask a friend, "Does your daddy live with you? Mine just disappeared."

Sensitive topics, like drugs, alcohol use, sex, disabilities, death, divorce, or personal differences can cause us to feel self-conscious. We are often unprepared to give information because we are not sure just how to explain a difficult subject. We may wonder if the children are too young for the information.

Parents need to talk to their kids about these issues because everyone else is!

Friends in the playground, siblings, teachers, TV shows, commercials, and movies are all influencing your child's views about sexuality, drug and alcohol use, violence, etc.



Let them hear YOUR voice.

It is the voice they want to hear. Share your opinions and values with your kids. It will open up doors of communication that should last a lifetime.

In the past, parents often refused to answer children's questions, and simply put them off with, "You're too young to know about that." That answer gives children the impression that this is an "off limits" area of discussion in your family. It may cause some children to become even more curious, and/or encourage them to seek the answers to their questions elsewhere.

While these topics may be uncomfortable, this is an opportunity to share not only correct information, but also our own values with our children. It also helps us establish confidence and closeness in our family relationships. Being an "ask-able" parent means that you convey acceptance of all your child's questions, not only the easy ones! You can reward a tough question with, "I'm really glad you feel close enough to come to me with these questions." Research clearly shows that children who feel emotionally attached to their families are least likely to engage in risky behaviors. When your children realize that you are an "ask-able" parent, they will turn to *you* for information and advice about these sensitive issues first.

How To Be An "Ask-able" Parent

1. First, it is important to find out what s/he really wants to know. If you are caught by surprise, take a deep breath. Stall for time and say something like, "That's an interesting question, why do you ask?" or "What do *you* think?"

(Continued on next page)

2. **Before you answer, think about your child's developmental stage.** Ask yourself, "How much information do I want to give? How much can my child understand?" In general, it is a good idea to start with a small amount of factual information. If a child wants to know more, they will ask additional questions.

One parent became quite alarmed when his six year old asked, "daddy, where did I come from?" He stammered and stalled until his child restated the question, "I mean, Jeannie came from the Bronx and Elisa from Brooklyn - where was I born?"

3. **It is always best to use proper terms and specifics when discussing sensitive issues.** If you need more information, or don't know the answer to their question, be honest; look into it and get back to them. But remember, it is important to answer the question as soon as you can!
4. **Invite children to ask questions.** When having a discussion with children about important matters, give them your full attention. Turn off the TV, put down the newspaper and focus on them. Don't criticize or judge, even if you don't agree or are alarmed by their questions.
5. **Realize that some children won't ask questions.** They may be embarrassed, or not yet concerned about these issues. In this case, you may have to give them information about personal safety, alcohol, drugs, or sex before they realize they need it! Remember that children make good choices when they have correct information; poor choices often come out of ignorance.
6. **Always try to act in the way you want your children to act.** Young children learn by copying, so parents who eat healthy food, take good care of their bodies, rest, and treat themselves and others with respect will be setting a good example without saying a word. Children are most likely to do what they see their parents do.

Talk with Your Kids Early and Often!

Sexuality is a natural, life-long process. It is a basic part of being human. From a very early age kids want to know where they come from, how they got in their mother's belly and why boys look different from girls. From the very beginning, your children will look to you for answers to their questions.

Let's look at a sample conversation:

- Child:** "Where did I come from?"
- Parent:** "Why do you ask?" or "Where do you think you came from?"
- Child:** "Well, did you get me at the hospital, or what?"
- Parent:** "You were born at a hospital. But, before that you grew inside of Mommy in a special place called a uterus."
- Child:** "How was there enough room in your body for me?"
- Parent:** "As a baby grows, the uterus gets larger to let the baby have enough room - it's like a balloon - but it can't pop!"
- Child:** "How did I get in the special place?"
- Parent:** "Well, a Mommy and Daddy can make a baby from a tiny egg cell in mommy's body and a sperm cell from daddy's body. Then the baby grows in the uterus until it is ready to be born."
- Child:** "How did I get out?"
- Parent:** "When you were ready to be born, we went to a hospital/birthing center (fill in the place) where people who knew all about birthing babies helped us. Does that answer your question?"
- Child:** "Yes. Can I go out to play now?"

Children who are adopted also need to hear how babies grow, and how they came to be a part of the family. Again, it is best to tell the simple truth, without too many details. "Your birth parents (first mommy and daddy) could not take care of you. They loved you so much that they made sure to find a good family to care for you."

Experts say you should talk with your kids early and often. In fact, most sexual education should be completed by the time your child enters puberty. The average age of physical development in this country is 8-11 years old for girls and 10-13 for boys. Children need to be prepared with a basic understanding of their own growth and development well before then. If you do this, the groundwork will be set for more complex discussions as your child matures.

Where Do I Begin?

The best place to start is with you. The questions below will help you identify some of your feelings and beliefs about sexuality. They'll help you to uncover some of the things that are important to you. Ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ What are three messages you received as a child about sexuality?
- ◆ Who did you talk to for answers to your questions?
- ◆ What are three messages you would like to pass along to your children?
- ◆ Is there a message you'd like to go back and give to your "child-self?"

Look at what you've written and notice if the messages you received were positive or negative. Many of us received negative messages about our sexuality. Now notice if any of the messages are accurate. Doing this short exercise will help you identify your values about sexuality and how sexuality was discussed when you were a child. What worked? What didn't? You can now make some clear choices about how you want to discuss sexuality with your children.

Many parents struggle with the questions of WHAT, WHEN, WHO and HOW regarding sexuality education. These are all valid questions.

WHAT and WHEN to Talk About:

Here are some guidelines for age appropriate sexuality information.

By the age of five, children:

- ◆ should be able to comfortably refer to their body parts with the correct anatomical names;
- ◆ should understand the difference between males and females and know how babies are made and born;
- ◆ need to understand that their bodies are theirs and that they can say "no" to touch that is not wanted.

Children aged 6-9 years old should also:

- ◆ be able to use correct language for boys and girls body parts;
- ◆ understand the life cycle – all things are born, most reproduce, all age and die;
- ◆ understand that we are sexual beings all of our lives;
- ◆ learn to question gender roles/ stereotypes;
- ◆ actively take part in managing their own health, well-being and personal safety;
- ◆ understand basic facts about HIV/AIDS - be clear on *how you can't* be infected (sharing a package of cupcakes, playing catch, borrowing crayons).

Sometimes parents are afraid to bring up sensitive topics, like sex or the use of drugs and alcohol. They may think that by sharing information they might actually encourage their child to engage in these behaviors. Research clearly shows just the opposite!

Children who are prepared with correct, factual information usually make the best choices in difficult situations.

There are some areas that may cause you some conflict because of your personal values and beliefs. Discussions about masturbation and sexual orientation may require further investigation and education.

WHO Should Talk to the Children:

Research shows that your kids want the information from you. In our society, children get so much information from so many sources that they may feel confused. They look to you for accurate information. Knowing your beliefs and values will reassure them. All of this will help them to make healthy decisions about their bodies and their sexuality as they grow.

Research also shows that mothers most often take the role of health advisor/educator, regardless of the sex of the child. Boys and girls have something to learn from both fathers and mothers - not only about the "facts of life," but about the way to treat and be treated respectfully by others. So...try to have your children learn from both sexes. If you are a single parent, you can ask for help from another family member, teacher, or trusted adult who shares your own values.

If you find that you need assistance in finding information to answer these sensitive questions, or would like some guidance from local health professionals, there are many opportunities for help listed on the back page.

HOW To Talk To Your Children:

Every family is different. Some parents are very comfortable talking about sexuality. It is easy for them. Others are not. They may feel uncomfortable or be nervous about saying the wrong thing, or saying too much. The result is that they often say nothing. But remember, saying nothing sends a message too. Your child may think that sexuality is "bad" because it is not discussed. This can be very confusing for everyone.

Using Teachable Moments

Teachable moments present themselves all the time. It may be easier to discuss sexuality with your children as issues and questions come up, rather than rely on the "big talk." Here are a few examples of teachable moments:

- ◆ When a child asks a direct question
- ◆ When taking a walk together; especially in spring!
- ◆ When a new baby is born in your family, or to someone you know
- ◆ When family or friends begin to date, or get married
- ◆ While watching movies, commercials, TV, reading children's books and magazines, and/or listening to the radio together.

(Continued on next page)

There's No Place Like Home

It's OK for parents to be uncomfortable. Many parents never talked with their own parents about sexuality. So of course you feel awkward. Just don't let that awkwardness stop you. It is OK to tell your child that you feel uncomfortable. It will break the ice and you'll both probably feel a little better. Now, take a deep breath and begin...

For more information on this topic, please call:

Cornell Cooperative Extension - 845-344-1234 (Workshops and material on "Living With Your Teen" and "Talking With Children About Sensitive Topics")

Planned Parenthood Mid Hudson Valley - 845-562-3098 ("Changing Lives: Parent-Daughter and Parent-Son" workshops and age specific resource literature.)

Virginia Brown - 845-726-4196 (Faith based puberty workshops)

Maternal Infant Services Network - 845-928-7448 (Workshops and literature)

Local school resources include the Health Teacher, Nurse, or School Nurse-Teacher

Local libraries have excellent age specific reading material. Ask for the children's librarian.

Sign up now for the Summer Reading Program at your local library, "Picture This, Imagine That - Read"
For more info: www.summerreadingnys.org

Websites

SEICUS – www.seicus.org
Can We Talk – www.canwetalk.org
Talking With Kids About Tough Issues – www.talkingwithkids.org
Ten Talks – www.ten-talks.com

Books

It's Perfectly Normal: Growing Up, Changing Bodies, Sex and Sexual Health. Robie Harris, Candlewick Press, 1996.
It's So Amazing: A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies & Families. Robie Harris, Candlewick Press, 1996.
What's Happening to My Body? A Book for Boys: A Growing Up Guide for Parents and Sons. Linda Madaras, Newmarket Press, 2000.
My Body, My Self for Boys: The What's Happening to My Body Workbook. Linda Madaras & Area Madaras, Newmarket Press, 2000.
What's Happening to My Body? A Book for Girls: A Growing Up Guide for Parents and Daughters. Linda Madaras, Newmarket Press, 2000.
My Body, My Self for Girls: The What's Happening to My Body Workbook. Linda Madaras & Area Madaras, Newmarket Press, 2000.

Materials

Unlocking The Secret, A Parent's Guide to Communicating With Your Kids (Booklet). Monroe County Departments of Health and Communications and Special Events.
There's No Place Like Home For Sex Education (Newsletter Handout s by age group). Planned Parenthood Health Services of Southwestern Oregon, 1999.
Human Sexuality: What Children Should Know and When They Should Know It (Pamphlet). Planned Parenthood Federation of America, #1700.
How To Talk With Your Child about Sexuality, A Parent's Guide (Pamphlet). Planned Parenthood Federation of America, #1692.

References

The Type of Questions Your Children Might Ask, adapted from *Talking with Kids about Tough Issues*; Lynne S Dumas and SEICUS
Raising Sexually Healthy Youth: Rights, Respect, Responsibility and Parent-Child Communication. TRANSITIONS Newsletter of Advocates For Youth, Volume 15 No. 1 September 2002.
Talking with Kids about Sensitive Topics: Sex, Drugs and AIDS. Handout, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Living With Your Teen, Resources

It's Never too Early to Learn About Prevention.



The Orange County Teen Pregnancy Prevention Coalition cordially invites all interested parents, educators and community members to learn more about talking with kids about sensitive topics. Our conference, "Talking With Youth: Crafting Messages That Matter", will take place on May 29, 2003 at the Newburgh Extension of Orange County Community College, from 8:30 AM to

4:30 PM. The presenter, Michelle Gerka, of Cicatelli Associates, will help participants to craft responsible health and safety messages that reach through "cultural noise" to influence young people's decisions about relationships and sexuality. \$20 registration fee includes a continental breakfast, lunch and all training materials. For a registration brochure, or more information, contact Stephanie Sosnowski of Maternal-Infant Services Network at 928-7448 ext. 15 or by email, stephanie@misn.us

VIP Value In Parenting

For more information on parenting education and/or the Orange County Parenting Coalition Action Team, contact Cornell Cooperative Extension at 845 - 344 - 1234.
www.cce.cornell.edu/orange



Editorial Staff: Denyse Variano: Cornell Cooperative Extension, Orange County; Stephanie Sosnowski, Maternal Infant Services Network.

Graphics: Nancy Karp, Cornell Cooperative Extension, O.C.

Funding / Distribution: Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, National Accounts Division, Middletown, NY; Orange County Partners for Children, a component of Healthy Orange, Inc.