

# Talking with Children about Sexuality / “Private Parts”

Janelle Durham, MSW, Parent Educator. GoodDaysWithKids.com, InventorsOfTomorrow.com

When parents imagine talking with their child about sexuality, they may picture sitting down with a teenager for “the talk.” It’s better to start the conversation long before then. Lots of important topics relate to sexuality: toileting, health, hygiene, body image, social norms, consent, abuse prevention, gender identity, sexual orientation, relationships and reproduction.

We can talk about these topics a little at a time, in *age appropriate ways*, from when our children are very young. These conversations give our children the information they need to stay safe and healthy, give us opportunities to share our family values, and let our kids know that we are “askable parents” who are available as a resource to them.

Here are suggestions for topics to address and possible messages to share with your child. All families have their own values, and you know your own child best, so adapt as needed.

## **Understanding Their Own Body, How It Works, and How to Keep It Healthy**

- Potty training age: Teach correct anatomical terms (penis, vulva, urine, bowel movement) This enables them to communicate with doctors and others. Teach them how to care for their own bodies – how to wipe after using the toilet, and how to wash their private parts.
- When they become curious about other people’s bodies that are different from theirs (often age 4 – 6), answer their questions. Once they are toileting independently, make sure they know about signs of illness to report to you (diarrhea, constipation, burning urination).
- Around age 8-9 – *before* they and their peers experience them, talk and offer written resources on the basics of puberty, menstrual cycle, and wet dreams / nocturnal emissions.
- By age 12 – *before* they and their peers are likely to be sexually active, talk about (and offer resources on) sexual health, contraception, prevention of STIs and delaying sexual activity.

**How They Feel About Their Bodies – Body Image.** Throughout your child’s life, be conscious of how you talk about your own body image in front of them, be aware of the impact of media messages and peer pressure, and reinforce healthy, realistic attitudes.

## **Understanding Social Norms about Nudity and Public vs. Private Behavior**

- Under age 4: Teach the idea of ‘private parts’ – the body parts that a swimsuit covers – and family and cultural norms on when and where it’s OK (or not OK) to show or touch them.
- At age 4 – 6, children may try to sneak a peek at others, or touch others. They may test out potty humor and swear words. Explain family values and set limits for what is appropriate and in what contexts. Talk about how other families may have different values.
- At age 7 – 12: Kids may play truth or dare style kissing games, they may seek out pictures of nudity or look up words in the dictionary. Set parental controls, monitor media usage, and also talk to children about pornography.
- At *any age*, a child may masturbate. Explain family rules, for example that this should only be done in private, in the bathroom or their bedroom.

## **Bodily Autonomy / Consent**

- Don’t require that your child give hugs or kisses to family members or others if they don’t want to. Before tickling or wrestling, ask them if they want that. If you’re rough-housing, stop every once in a while and ask “are you still having fun? Do you want to keep playing?”

- Teach that it's not OK for others to touch their private parts without permission. Even parents and doctors should explain why they need to touch them and ask if it's OK.
- Talk about healthy touch – touch that is comforting, welcome, and pleasant – versus unhealthy touch – intrusive, unwelcome, uncomfortable. Tell them what to do, and who they can talk to, if someone touches them in any way that makes them uncomfortable.
- Instead of teaching “stranger danger”, teach “tricky people.” <https://gooddayswithkids.com/tricky-people/>

**Teaching to Ask for Consent Before Touching Others.** Encourage your child to ask before giving hugs and kisses or climbing in someone's lap. Let them know not to assume that just because someone has welcomed their touch in the past means they want it right now.

**Gender Identity / Roles.** There are many components of gender: a person's biological sex (body parts), gender identity (do they view themselves as male or female), expression (how they dress, wear their hair), and gender roles (what others expect them to be / do). Think about your family values, and how you communicate those values with what you say and do. [www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents/preschool/how-do-i-talk-with-my-preschooler-about-identity](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents/preschool/how-do-i-talk-with-my-preschooler-about-identity)

**Sexual Orientation and Attraction.** Kids age 3 – 8 may explore couple relationships. They may talk about getting married, or imitate behaviors such as holding hands and kissing. They may work to figure out the difference between liking a friend, loving a family member, being attracted to someone and being in love. By age 4 or 5, most children have noticed that it is more common for romantic relationships to be between two people of the opposite sex. Think about your family values about sexual orientation and share those with your children.

**Babies and Sex:** Preschoolers notice pregnant bellies and may tell you that babies come from mommies. They may want to know how the baby will get out. By age 5, children may get curious about how the baby got in there. For a preschooler, we might tell them that a man's sperm and a woman's egg make a baby, and the mother carries the baby in her uterus. For a 5 – 6 year old, some parents choose to talk about how a man and woman lay together in a special way to make a baby. For older elementary students you may choose to talk in more detail about sex, and address the fact that sex can make a baby, but more often adults engage in sex because it feels good to adults, and they take steps to not accidentally make a baby.

**Healthy Relationships with Others:** Throughout your child's early years, your words and actions, and those of other people in their lives, model for them what to expect from relationships. Try to model healthy relationships. If there are unhealthy relationships in your environment, try to insulate younger children from them, and talk to older children about them. Share that, in general, a healthy relationship is one where you feel good about yourself, you feel supported and valued by the other person, and you feel safe with them.

## When and How to Have the Conversation

Answer questions as they come up. Before dumping on a lot of information, first ask them what they already know about a topic – that helps you set your conversation at the appropriate level of sophistication and also lets you catch and clear up any misconceptions they have.

Look for teachable moments: When you happen to see something in a book, a movie, or people watching, just drop in a few little tidbits of information.

Buy a book or two. For younger children, you may read them together. For older children, you may just have them on their bookshelf for them to use as a resource whenever they want to.

**Recommended books for kids:** Preschool age: [Amazing You](#) by Saltz. Early elementary: [What's the Big Secret](#) by Brown. Upper elementary: [It's So Amazing!](#) by Harris.

**For more details, and links to more resources,** see: [www.GoodDaysWithKids.com](http://www.GoodDaysWithKids.com).