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LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX WITH OUR YOUNG CHILDREN

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When talking with children about sex, timing is important. What's also important is who's doing the talking and how they feel about what they are saying. Television programs should not give information.

Sex education starts at birth, but parents often totally avoid talking to their children about sex until they are 6 or 7. The excuse is that preschoolers "won't understand it anyway" or "they're not asking questions – why should we talk about it?" This creates a taboo: sex becomes a subject one does not talk about, particularly among little girls.

When parents do discuss sex – often pushed into it by a child's curiosity about an offhand remark – they either give enough details to confuse a medical student or bring up the bird and bees and cows and chickens. Either approach may get the parent off the hood, but neither is likely to be helpful to the child.

Researchers have found that children have stages of understanding consistent with their developmental stages. For a 3-year-old, sexual curiosity is mostly a question of geography. Where do people come from, and where were they before? An anatomical explanation is frequently beyond the 3-year-old's grasp; simply saying that the baby comes from mommy and daddy is usually adequate. Please leave out heaven and the hospital; those confuse the issue and may give the child the notion that the parents are somehow uninvolved in the process. Don't be alarmed if a little girl puts a pillow in her shorts to copy a pregnant relative or neighbor – she's not displaying sexual precocity but working through a dramatic and intriguing process.

Children who are somewhat older think that babies are manufactured like cars or refrigerators. They can understand an explanation which includes the sperm and egg. Children can readily see the involvement of the mother – they notice that "she's getting fat" and has lost her lap. But what about daddy? Please give credit where credit is due and use the proper terminology.

Be assured that children will not become preoccupied with sex if explanations are given. On the contrary, they happily drop the subject and go off to ride their bikes. Also be prepared: Children do notice anatomical differences very early. Many children engage in some mutual exploration. This is not abnormal and children should not be shamed or chastised. Again, a matter-of-fact statement about the differences usually suffices. Many preschoolers explore by “playing doctor.” Sometimes this only involves using the “stethoscope” and solemnly listening for thoracic noises. At other times, it involves a more careful inspection of other body parts. Calm acknowledgement of differences rather than punishment is the best way of dealing with this.

Children should be encouraged to not permit others to touch their sexual organs. Young children can easily get eroticized by overstimulation. Sharing a bed with a parent or excessive handling of the child’s genitals in cleaning and diapering might overstimulate the child.

Creating an open atmosphere requires that parents be comfortable with their own sexuality; this is where problems frequently lie. Our own feelings about sex are tied up with our own education in the subject, which frequently was inadequate. But times have changed. Television and explicit movies and publications are all around us and offer children lots of information and misinformation. If parents want to instill their own values in their children, they’re well advised to educate their children about sex thoughtfully and deliberately.

Sex education in school, combined with parental communication, is probably the best way to go about this very important process. Many of us feel that sex education should be carried out at home. Unfortunately, this just isn’t always happening. Too many children get values education consisting of warnings about what shouldn’t be done, couched in threats.

The antidote to this is information. For the young child, sex education needs to be simple and straightforward. For the older child, it needs to be physiologically correct and non-threatening. For the teenager, it needs to be based on a value system that will serve her or him well in life.

Who said that parenting was easy? There are books available. There are parenting classes that deal with sex education. Now, we only need more parents and grandparents to use these resources and determine to give the children in their care good and fearless education about their sexual selves.