

By Patti Verbanas

Beyond the birds and the bees

There's more to sex education than the mechanics of reproduction. Our experts help parents navigate the tricky territory of giving their children "The Talk."

When it comes to your child learning about sex, there is no better teacher than you, the parent. Squeamish? You're not alone. If the thought of explaining sex to your kids doesn't leave you uneasy, perhaps the thought of your children as sexual beings does. Accept the fact that your children will be sexual before you are comfortable with it.



In 2009, Harvard University researchers published an eye-opening study in which they interviewed 13- to 17-year-olds about their sex lives, what they had done sexually and at what age. Then, they asked the teens and their parents about the types of talks they had together about sex. The researchers repeated these questions at three-, six- and 12-month intervals. Their findings? More than 40 percent of parents did not talk to their children about safe-sex practices until after their kids were sexually active. Two-thirds of the boys in the study who had intercourse revealed they had not talked to a parent about how to properly use a condom; likewise,

to dip into an adult sexual culture are as readily available as the screen on your child's iPhone.

The good news is that arming your children with knowledge of their sexuality need not be daunting. We spoke with experts on sexuality and family communication for their sexual education advice. Following is their roadmap to having "The Talk."

REALIZE "THE TALK" IS REALLY AN ONGOING DISCUSSION Teaching your children about their sexuality—and how to handle it—does not begin with a one-time sit-down at puberty. By then, it's already too late. If you start by building

sexuality starts with creating a bond with the parents. If parents don't prep that relationship early, it will be difficult later. You want to create an environment in which your child knows he or she can come to you no matter what."

CONTEMPLATE YOUR UNIQUE MESSAGE

The approach you take and the message you deliver depends on your personal belief system and the maturity and temperament of your individual child. You may need to take different approaches on different timetables with siblings. From a vitalistic perspective, parents may want "The Talk" they have with their children to recognize the biological realities of sex—that nature designed it purely for the purpose of reproduction. It might be especially important to remind pre-teens and teens, who are on the precipice of becoming sexually active, of that fact, along with the idea that the intelligence of nature built in the feel-good factor to increase the likelihood that people will have sex and make babies.

Many parents will also want to frame their discussions about sex within their family's religious or moral perspectives. "Parents should take into account their own beliefs to know when to start the disclosure process," Rubin says, noting that religious principles can provide an excellent backdrop for sex talks. "You can put it in context of your morals: 'Your father and I have a sacred relationship, and sex is beautiful because of the commitment of our relationship.'" There's a line to walk, however. Give children the age-appropriate answers they seek within the framework of your values, but do not lecture or make judgments that might make them feel like they've done something wrong. Otherwise, they might stop asking.

START EARLY, SPEAK PLAINLY "Realistically, sex education should begin at birth by familiarizing the child with his or her own anatomy and its functions," says Gina Kassel, a family counselor in Bridgewater, N.J. "Parents should always be positive in their approach and be mindful not to make the child feel any type of shame in regard to the body or urges. If done in a matter-of-fact manner, the child may be less embarrassed and more curious about the topic. The parent needs to appear at ease while having this discussion so that the child also feels comfortable." Experts agree that parents should shy away from cute pet names for body parts—"like va-jay-jay," notes Schwartz—in favor of the anatomical terms. And the discus-



most parents had not told their daughters—who, unbeknownst to their parents were already sexually active—about birth control options or about how to resist unwanted sexual advances.

These numbers point to a communication breakdown in American families. Part of the problem is denial by otherwise well-meaning parents who naively believe that such sexual experiences happen with children, just not with their child. Statistically, though, it is their child, and unfortunately, children are entering into sexual encounters without the tools to know how to handle them. Plus, children are living in a much different society than their parents were when they learned about sex. Information and misinformation are prevalent, and opportunities

open lines of communication from when children are toddlers, you create a life-long environment of trust and mutual respect—and establish yourself, the parent, as the authority on sex, rather than friends or the media. "The idea is that there isn't one talk, but rather many talks as they become age-appropriate," says Dr. Pepper Schwartz, a nationally renowned sexologist and author of "Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Children About Sex and Character." "A lot of people have this conversation when their child is reaching adolescence. At that age, kids are communicating with their peers, not their parents," says Dr. Lisa Rubin, a licensed clinical psychologist and director of the Student Success Center at Life University in Marietta, Ga. "Talking about

sion is equal-opportunity: Fathers can talk to daughters and mothers can talk to sons if it is more comfortable for all parties.

TALK WITH YOUR TODDLER When your child is a toddler, a good entry point is to familiarize your child with his or her own anatomy and its functions during bath time. “Young children have a lot of curiosity, and you can use that to establish questions,” says Rubin. A pregnancy is another entry point. “The kids will want to feel the woman’s belly and ask how the baby got there. The parent can respond to the question based on the children’s ages. [Parents] should never discourage the child, turn it around or try to avoid the question.” Also, don’t assume that the child wants to know everything at this point. Give an answer and then see if they ask follow-up questions.

ESTABLISH YOURSELF AS AN APPROACHABLE AUTHORITY “Children should know they can come to you and that no question is taboo,” says Rubin. “How you answer depends on where the child is intellectually or emotionally, but the message you want to give is that any question is acceptable.” Schwartz notes that parents should take time to actively listen to the child rather than give lectures. This will allow them to “enjoy talking to you about sex, even if they don’t confide in you about everything,” she says.

RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS YOUR CHILD IS READY FOR A SIT-DOWN Even with open communication, at some point you may want to carve out quiet time with your child to lay all the age-appropriate facts out at once. A good indicator is when your child starts asking a lot of questions. “They may also be talking about their friends’ issues with sex, which means you can bet your kids have their own,” Schwartz says. One way to ease into the conversation is to start with the changes the child is experiencing with his or her body.

If your child hasn’t asked you and you feel it is time to have a formal talk that can piece together all the information you’ve given over the years, take the initiative. “When children are in the sixth, seventh or eighth grades, there is more interest in bonding and relationships,” Rubin says. “But some children are not physically maturing yet or not keeping up emotionally. Your

conversations need to be geared toward where your child is.”

STRESS THAT RELATIONSHIPS MATTER “There is always respect in a [healthy] relationship—showing care, love and affection,” says Rubin. Put sex in the context of its true meaning: to bring new life into the world in the environment of a healthy, strong, caring relationship between two people. When it comes to sex, children should know that the relationship comes first.

BE A ROLE MODEL Just as you model proper table etiquette, the best way to convey to your child how to relate to a mate in a successful relationship is to model it for them, Rubin says. The respect and regular affection you show for your spouse or significant other will teach volumes, as will age-appropriate discussions of relationships shown in the media. Juxtapose what is being viewed on television with what you do at home. Then, for a real teachable moment, take

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it one step further: Explain to your children the reasons why you might handle your relationship differently than what is being seen on the screen. “I find a lot of parents tell their kids not to do something, but don’t give them the explanation,” Rubin says.

SELECT A “SEX ED CONFIDANT” FOR OLDER CHILDREN “When children get into late middle school and high school, talking to parents about sex may have an icky cast to it,” Schwartz says. “Pick an adult friend or relative they like and make them the designated ‘expert.’ The child can go to this person with an embarrassing question or problem.”

BE HONEST “It’s OK for parents to say, ‘It’s a little uncomfortable for me to talk to you about this subject because I’m not sure what to say. So, let’s figure this out together,’” says Rubin. “This tactic is effective in the teenage years as an ice-breaker. They don’t want to feel there will always be an intense experience every time they broach

the subject. If you can get into a conversation where everyone feels safe, there will be more disclosure.” Tell your children you are their biggest supporter. Talk about your own childhood and how you either had someone help you navigate your sexuality or wished you had. One caveat about honesty from Schwartz: “What children don’t want to hear about is your sex life, even though they might ask you when was the first time you ‘did it.’ Be prepared to give an answer you can live with!”

USE VISUAL AIDS Books can be a great prompt for discussion or a helpful resource for children to use on their own to explore concepts privately. There are many books available to guide children that reflect a family’s particular culture, faith or philosophy on sexual life. “Start giving kids books when they are very young, so they can understand the body,” Schwartz says. “There are great books on anatomy and how the body works, which includes genitals and reproductive systems.

Later, there are books for each age level.” She recommends visiting the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States website (siecus.org) to explore titles appropriate for each age. Parents prepping for “The Talk” can reference Schwartz’s book (co-authored by Dominick Cappello) or others like “Everything You Never Wanted Your Kids to Know About Sex (But

Were Afraid They’d Ask)” by Justin Richardson and Mark Schuster.

ANTICIPATE REACTIONS How you handle your child’s reaction and validate his or her feelings is important. If your child seems overwhelmed, Rubin suggests saying something like, “Wow, you must be so overwhelmed. You might not feel ready to have these conversations, but I want you to know so if you hear about it from people around you, you know what they are talking about.”

GO AHEAD AND GIGGLE Some parents like to approach “The Talk” with a sense of levity; this depends on the rapport they have with their child. “The content itself is not goofy, but some joking can be an effective introduction to the concept,” Rubin explains. “Sometimes, children have to relax before they can actually talk about something serious.” And feel free to laugh along with them. It’s all right to feel nervous—even for us parents.

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