

Raising Sexually Healthy Children

Tips for supporting your child to be sexually healthy

- Provide nurturing touches and interactions that support children's positive feelings of self and others.
- Provide a variety of opportunities for all children, regardless of gender.
- Talk to children with language and ways that embrace all genders.
- Teach children to accept people's differences and uniqueness.
- Teach children scientific words for all body parts, including penis, vulva, breast, anus, etc.
- Teach children that some parts of their bodies are private.
- Teach children that their bodies belong to them and that everyone has the right to decide who can and cannot touch their own body.
- Welcome children's questions by telling them, "I am glad you asked me!" or "What a great question!"
- Encourage everyone in the family (children and adults) to share their feelings.
- Help children to understand how their attitudes and behaviours affect others. Remind children that it is okay to stop and rethink their behaviour, and perhaps even change their mind.
- Tell children clearly and directly what is and what is not appropriate behaviour, without making them feel guilty or ashamed.
- Be a positive role model for children.

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Sexual Development in Children

Birth to Age Two

- begin to develop a positive or negative attitude towards own body
- start to learn expected behaviours for different genders
- explore body parts, including genitals
- experience pleasure from touch to all parts of the body, including genitals
- may experience an orgasmic response to rubbing of genitals, perhaps against a toy or blanket
- erections can occur while fetus is still in the uterus and shortly after birth
- vaginal lubrication and clitoral erections may occur shortly after birth

Ages Five to Eight

- learn what is acceptable/unacceptable to adults and which adults are comfortable with the subject of sexuality
- more affected by external influences (e.g., peers, media)
- show a strong interest in gender roles that are often stereotypes
- may continue body exploration and self-pleasuring
- try to look at people when they are nude or undressing
- may become modest
- may use sexual language to tease, shock, joke, and/or impress friends

Ages Three and Four

- enjoy exploring their body parts (including genitals, nipples, anus) and self-pleasuring; may touch these body parts when in public places
- show curiosity about bodies; try to look at people when they are nude or undressing
- engage in body exploration games (aka. playing doctor) with friends and siblings
- interested in touching people's breasts
- experiment with adult words including 'bathroom words' and swear terms
- establish a clear belief about their own gender, but also explore various gender roles through play (i.e., dressing up, dramatic play)
- curious about how babies are made but still develop their own ideas about where babies come from regardless of what they are told

Ages Nine to Twelve

- may continue body exploration and self-pleasuring; aware of erotic element of activities
- may show new interest in physical appearance
- increasing influence by peers and media; may show interest in sexual media
- may show signs of puberty; may have fantasies and crushes

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Answering Children's Questions about Sexuality

...for all stages!

WHY?

- * Children are curious about sexuality.
- * Children see things around them all the time that are confusing.
- * By welcoming questions, a child learns that they can come to you when something is confusing instead of turning to sources that may not give accurate or caring answers.
- * This is a way of building a healthy caregiver-child relationship.
- * This is an opportunity to share values with children (e.g., honesty, self-esteem).
- * Answering questions in a positive way reinforces that sexuality is a wonderful and valuable part of who they are.

WHEN?

- * Whenever they ask!
- * Even if you do not know the answer, you can respond by saying "Good question. I will try to find the answer and let you know."
- * Anytime can be a 'teachable moment' (e.g., watching a TV program, seeing a pregnant person, when a pet has babies).
- * Ask questions even if they don't – "What do you think?", "What do you already know about that?" – without forcing them to talk. Just asking says that you can be someone to talk to when they are ready.

HOW?

- * Answer in a way that boosts the child's self-esteem – "What a great question!"
- * Ask the child what they know, think, feel...
- * Find a book on the topic of the child's questions and read the book with the child.
- * Take time to think about the answer. This could be a few minutes or a few days, as long as you help the child to get an answer. You may want to talk with another adult about how you might answer a difficult question.
- * Acknowledge when you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed, if you are.
- * Acknowledge when you don't know an answer, and will find out.

WHAT TO SAY?

- * Keep it accurate, honest, short, and simple.
- * Use words and ideas that the child can understand at their developmental level.
- * Be positive - let the child know that you are glad they came to you with their questions.
- * Avoid lectures and angry talk.
- * Respond to questions about your personal sexual activities by teaching about privacy – "You asked if I'd ever had sex. There are some things that are private; you will have private things too that you will not share with everyone."

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Young Children

- **The Bare Naked Book ***
Kathy Stinson & Heather Collins, 2006
- **It's So Amazing! A book about Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families ***
Robie H. Harris & Michael Emberley, 2014
- **What Makes a Baby? A story for every kind of family and every kind of kid**
Cory Silverberg, 2013
- **Mommy, Mama and Me / Daddy, Papa and Me**
Leslea Newman & Carol Thompson, 2009
- **Do You Have a Secret?**
Jennifer Moore-Mallinos, 2005
- **The Family Book ***
Todd Parr, 2010
- **Jacob's New Dress ***
Sarah & Ian Hoffman, 2014

Resources

...for Raising Sexually Healthy Children!

Older Children & Young Teens

- **It's Not the Stork: A Book About Girls, Boys, Babies, Bodies, Families and Friends ***
Robie H. Harris & Michael Emberley, 2008
- **It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex and Sexual Health ***
Robie H. Harris & Michael Emberley, 2014
- **100% Me: The How, Why and When of Growing Up**
Elinor Greenwood & Alexander Cox, 2009
- **Sex is a Funny Word***
Cory Silverberg, 2015

* indicates book available at
Toronto Public Library

Parents & Caregivers

- www.toronto.ca/health/sexualhealth Toronto Public Health Sexual Health Program
- www.sexualityandu.ca Information website from the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada
- www.teachingsexualhealth.ca Parent & teacher resources from Alberta Sexual Health
- www.boostforkids.org Parent & caregiver resources from Boost Child & Youth Advocacy Centre
- **More Speaking of SEX: What your Children Need to Know and When they Need to Know it ***
Meg Hickling, 2005
- **Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children ***
Diane Ehrensaft, 2011

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