



IT'S TIME ... TO TALK ABOUT IT! CONNECT. RESPECT. PREVENT SEXUAL VIOLENCE.

## It's time ... to talk to your children about healthy sexuality.

**S**exual violence is an issue that affects everyone in a community regardless of age. Understanding and talking to your children about healthy sexual development can help parents and caregivers to protect their children from sexual violence.

### What is healthy sexual development?

Parents and caregivers often want to know what behaviors and expressions are part of normal sexual development for children. Since ideas of what's "normal" can vary depending on culture, beliefs, and other factors, let's focus on what healthy sexual development looks like. It's important to remember that:

**Human beings are sexual beings from birth.** It is common for children to be curious about the body and sexuality.

**Children receive messages about sexuality from a very young age.** Sexual behaviors can be ignored, highlighted, punished, or supported. For example, consider how differently parents may react to a child who touches their own genitals while taking a bath. Such reactions send messages that may stick with children and help to shape their view of sexuality as they mature.

**There are warning signs of child sexual abuse and it is important to know what they are.** It is also important to know the difference between behaviors that are cause for concern and behaviors that are common and healthy.

### Why talk to your children about sexuality?

**Prevent sexual abuse.** Talking to your children about sexuality provides them with information that may help protect them from abuse. Basic information, such as using proper names for body parts, and understanding boundaries around sexuality – that certain parts of their body are private – can help children understand boundaries, identify abuse and tell someone they trust.

**Open the lines of communication.** Talking to your children about sexuality builds trust and lets children know that they can come to you for help. Talking discourages secrets and establishes that no topic or question is off-limits.

**Lower their potential risk.** Children whose parents talk to them about sexuality are more likely to delay intercourse and more likely to practice safer sex when they do become sexually active (Martinez, Abma, & Copen, 2010). Talking to children about sexuality doesn't give them permission to be sexually active, but it does ensure that they have the information needed to act in a healthy, responsible manner when they do become sexually active.



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## Tips for talking to your children

Talking to your children about sexuality can feel overwhelming. Here are some tips to make the conversation easier:

**Do your homework.** Many adults never received information on sexuality or sex education. Many parents don't know what to say. The good news is there are great resources on the topic of sexuality and on how to address sexuality with children. If you feel unsure, read up on the topic.

**Don't panic.** If you appear nervous or embarrassed, children will notice and react to it with uneasiness. Keeping your composure can help children see that sexuality is not something to be ashamed of or embarrassed to talk about.

**Don't lecture.** Lecturing doesn't promote open dialogue. Make sure you are talking and listening.

**Stay age-appropriate.** Children need to know different levels of information at different stages of human development. For example, a 4-year-old should know the names of their body parts, but doesn't need to know details about sex. There are resources, below, to help you determine what information is age-appropriate.

**Start a conversation.** Ask a question to start the conversation. For example, for younger children ask "Do you know all the names of your body parts?" For older children, ask "Your Aunt is pregnant, do you know what that means?"

**Communicate your values.** Children may be able to get factual information from other sources, but family is often the primary source for helping to develop an individual's sense of values around sexuality. Understanding your own values, feelings and beliefs when it comes to sexuality will help you communicate these values to your child.

**Pay attention to what your children see, hear and say.** Children are influenced by the world around them. Music, TV, Internet and peers all provide children with messages about sexuality. Be aware of what they are hearing and look for teachable moments. For example, if a 10-year-old says their classmate has a girlfriend, ask them what they think that means. This is a great way to start a conversation.

## Resources

- **National Sexual Violence Resource Center**  
[www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)
- **Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network**  
[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)
- **Children Now**  
[www.childrennow.org/index.php/learn/twk\\_sex](http://www.childrennow.org/index.php/learn/twk_sex)
- **There's No Place Like Home ... for Sex Education** [www.noplacelikehome.org](http://www.noplacelikehome.org)
- **Prevent Child Abuse Vermont's Care for Kid**  
[www.pcavt.org/index.asp?pageid=6](http://www.pcavt.org/index.asp?pageid=6)

## References

Martinez, G., Abma, J., & Copen, C. (2010). *Educating teenagers about sex in the United States. NCHC Data Brief (No.44)*. Retrieved from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db44.pdf>



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## Scenario and discussion points: Between a parent and child

Talking to your children about sexuality can be a challenge. The scenario below focuses on an interaction between a parent and child. Here are discussion questions and suggestions to help you start your own conversations.

### Aisha (32) and Michael (7)

Aisha is a woman with a hectic schedule. Often, her husband travels for work, so she spends a lot of time alone with their 7-year-old son Michael. Michael is intelligent and has adjusted well to school. Aisha feels lucky to have such a great kid. During the week, Aisha picks up Michael from school, and they talk about his day on their ride home. Today, Michael seemed a bit quieter than usual. Aisha thought maybe he was just tired. Later during dinner, Michael looked up from his plate and said "Mom, what is sex?" Aisha was surprised by his question but tried her best to act composed. As Michael sat there waiting for her answer Aisha thought, "What do I tell him? He's only seven."

## Discussion questions

1. What might Aisha be feeling? What might be helpful for her to say or do?
2. What might Michael be thinking or feeling? Why do you think he's asking this question?
3. Do you think most parents feel prepared for these types of questions? Why or why not?

## Discussion points

- An important first step is to get more information. After all, "sex" can mean different things. Why is Michael asking the question? Where did he hear about sex? What does he think sex is? This can help Aisha gauge what Michael knows, where he got his information and if there is any cause for concern. Also, this can help her determine how much information she wants to share with her son.
- Aisha can give an age-appropriate response that reflects her family's values. It is unlikely that Michael is interested in detailed information. It's likely that he heard the word used at school and wants to know what it means. As a parent, Aisha can choose an answer that is accurate and reflects the values she would like to share with her son.
- Rather than get angry or punish Michael, Aisha might take the opportunity to let Michael know that he can always come to her (and his father) when he has questions. This builds a relationship where open communication is valued.

## Moving forward

Interested in doing more? Here are some suggestions for what individuals can do to get involved:

- Talk to your own children about sexuality. Use these resources to help you start the conversation.
- Find out what your children are being taught at school. Are your children receiving comprehensive sex education? If not, find out what is and is not being taught.
- Advocate for and support medically-accurate and age-appropriate curriculum addressing topics of sexuality.
- Be a support to other parents. If other parents are struggling with "the talk" offer them resources and advice.