

Talking To Your Young Child About Bodies and Feelings

Through daily words and actions, and through what is not said or done, parents and caregivers teach children the fundamentals of life; the meaning of love, human contact and interaction, friendship, fear, anger, laughter, kindness and self-assertiveness.

For many reasons, some personal and some societal, parents often find sexuality a difficult subject to approach. For parents with children who have disabilities, anxieties and misgivings are often heightened. There are many misconceptions about sexuality of children with disabilities. They grow and become adolescents with physically bodies and a host of emerging social and sexual feelings and needs.

This tip sheet is to help you start thinking about the information, values, attitudes and interpersonal skills you would like to see developed in your child.

Toddler Stage

The lessons learned during the toddler stage are important for healthy social-sexual development.

- What is a boy?

- What is a girl?

- Share basic information about sexuality.

- Take advantage of a teaching opportunity like bath time or getting dressed in front of a mirror to teach about body parts.

- Look at picture books.

If your child is being toilet trained, talk to your child's teacher or caregiver about your child's understanding of body parts and the names you use at home to identify them.

Preschool / School age

In the preschool and early school years, most children become less absorbed with self-exploration but maintain their curiosity about how things happen. They are also fascinated to discover playmates may look different from them and may investigate this fact through staring , touching or asking questions. This type of behavior is normal and needs to be treated as such.

- Answer questions calmly and truthfully.

- Explain what you can do in public, in private and the difference between them.

- Teach your child to respect the privacy of others.

- Talk about who to hug, who to shake hands with and why.

- Teach your child the appropriate place to dress and undress.

At this stage of self-exploration, children's curiosity about their own bodies and those of others may lead to some "show me" games. This can be very unsettling to parents, but remembering that curiosity prompts this action will help you in your response. Calm remarks such as "Please put your clothes back on and come inside" give a more positive message than "Shame on you!"

Come in here this minute!". Soon afterwards make sure you talk to your child in simple basic terms about his or her body and appropriate behavior.

A great concern of parents and professionals is that children with disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Therefore, one message that is important to start mentioning when children are young is that their bodies belong to them..

Talk about "private" body parts.

Talk about "good touch" and "bad touch".

Talk about some of the people that touch your child (school nurse, doctor, mom, dad) and why; and who should or should not touch "private" body parts.

Talk about what a child should do if approached by a stranger who tries to persuade them to go with him or her.

Talk about good and bad secrets. Encourage your child to understand the importance of telling parents all of them.

All children learn at a different pace. Some children will need a parent's supervision and guidance for a longer period of time.

Here are several suggestions you may wish to consider when approaching discussions of sexuality with your child:

Not all discussions need to be lectures or situations where you sit your child down "to talk about sex". There are many daily "teachable moments" that you can take advantage of to initiate a relaxed discussion, such as diapering a baby, watching a television show or a question about sex, that a child or youth suddenly asks.

When you wish your child to learn a particular value or behavior about sexuality, make sure you give your reasons for that value or behavior. This enables the child to understand why the value or behavior is important.

Bring home books about sexuality from the public library and share them with your child, much as you would any other type of book. Curl up together and read, look at the illustrations and talk about the content in a relaxed manner.

Tailor information to the needs of your child. For children with mental retardation, for example, a small amount of information should be given at a time, in simple, concrete terms, perhaps supported by illustrations.

Share your feelings about different terms and give your child the language you prefer. For example, you can say, "The correct word is..." or "I prefer..." and give a reason why.

Note: The resources used for this fact sheet are from NICHY, News Digest, 1990, and Shared Feelings, A Parents Guide to Sexuality Education for Children, Adolescents and Adults Who Have Mental Handicap; Diane Maksym, M.Ed., The G. Allen Roeher Institute, North York, Ontario, Canada; 1990, used with permission.

For more information, contact your care coordinator at Special Medical Services, NH Department of Health and Human Services, 29 Hazen Drive, Concord, NH 03301 1-800-852-3345 ext. 4488.