

# TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY



## PARENT PACKAGE

0-7 YEARS OLD



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# WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

## The Parent's Role

Parents want to provide the guidance and knowledge their children need to become responsible and happy adults. But they can also sometimes be afraid of talking about sexuality with their children because:

- they believe their child is too young/not ready
- they don't know how to talk to their child about the subject
- they have a lack of understanding of the stages of sexual development
- they are uncomfortable talking about reproductive body parts and functions
- the topic of sex and sexuality was not discussed by their own parents when they were growing up
- they worry talking about sexuality and reproduction will encourage experimentation
- they are unsure what children need to know and when they need to know it

As parents, you are already teaching your children many things about sexuality and have been since the day they were born. They learn from

- the way they are touched by others
- the way their bodies feel to them
- what your family believes is okay and not okay to do
- the words that family members use (and don't use) to refer to parts of the body
- watching the relationships around them
- observing male/female roles
- watching television, listening to music
- talking with their friends

## The Difference Between Sex and Sexuality

Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. Examples of sex categories are "male" and "female". The term "sex" is also often used to mean "sexual activity," but for the context of a discussion about sexuality and sexual health, the above definition is correct.

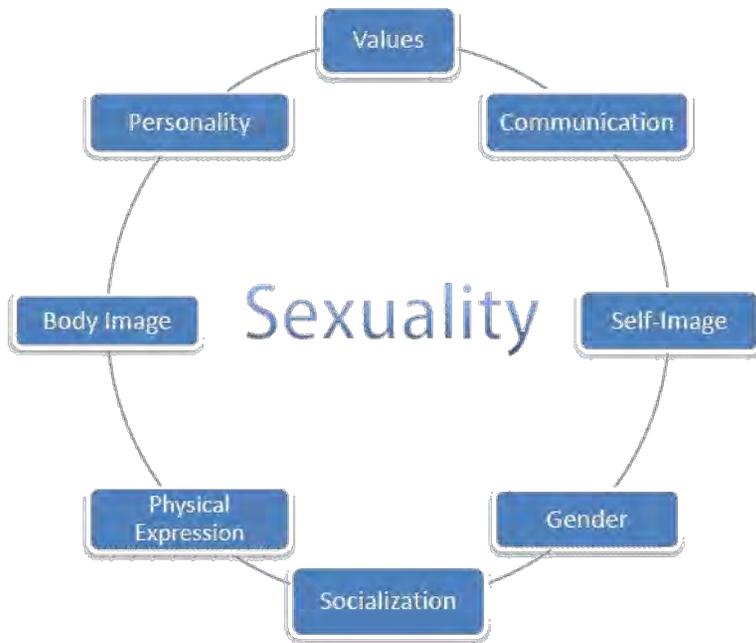
It is common to hear both the terms "sex" and "gender". These terms can cause some confusion as they are closely related but have different meanings.

Gender refers to the roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Examples of gender categories are "masculine" and "feminine".

Sexuality is not just sexual intercourse or sexual activity. It also has to do with

- being female or male, and how females and males are alike and different in the way they look and act
- how we view our bodies and our relationships with each other
- how we grow and change over the years
- who we are as women and men (girls and boys)
- intimacy
- how we reproduce

Sexuality is an important part of being human and healthy sexuality is an important part of a person's overall health and well-being.



The sexuality wheel shows how different ideas and experiences influence the meaning of sexuality. Sexuality is much more than intercourse. Since we all interpret and experience sexuality differently, parents have a chance to provide support to their children in developing an understanding of sexuality that reflects personal experiences and family values. The way people understand sexual health will affect the way they learn and talk about sexual health. By providing a variety of opportunities, we can promote respect and belonging while appreciating different perspectives.

## Opportunities for Parents

The benefit of parents speaking to their child about sexuality is that they can

- communicate their own values about sexuality
- provide correct information
- better understand their child's perspective
- answer questions honestly and using words they can understand
- start the conversation
- tailor the information they share based on their understanding of their child's stage of development, life experience, personality and knowledge level
- help their child make good decisions and then stand by them

# FAMILY BELIEFS

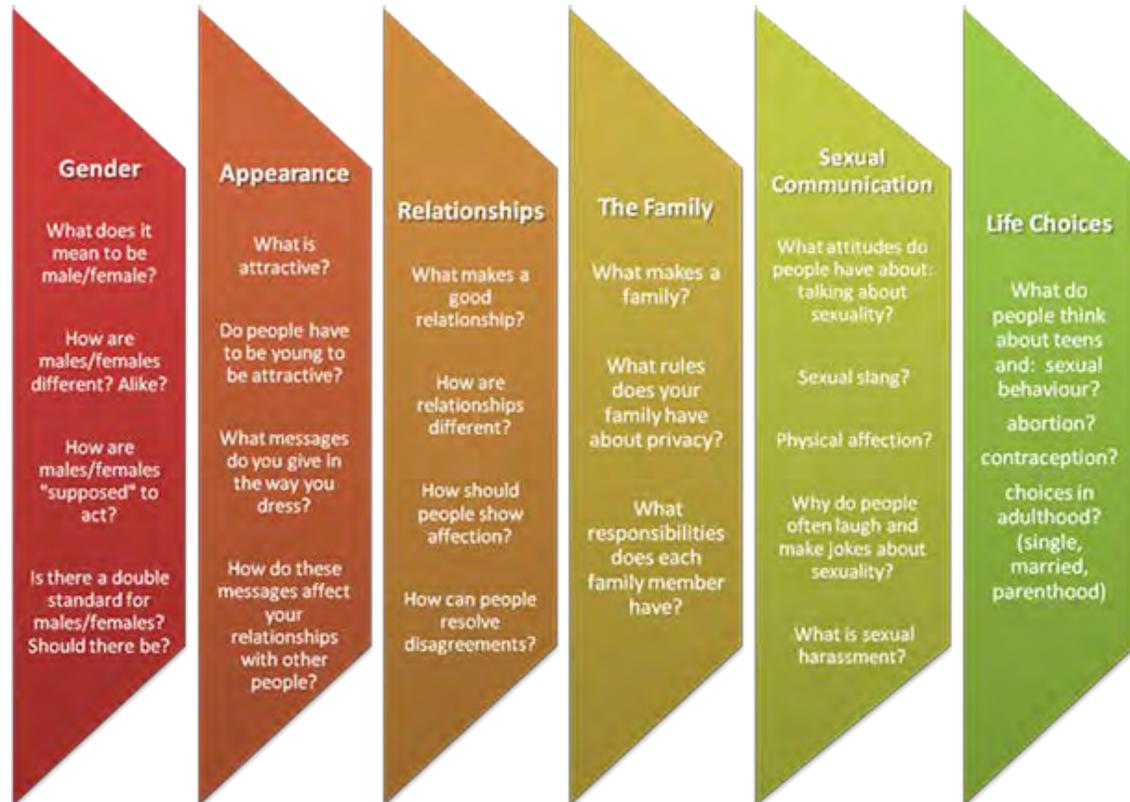
As a parent, you hope that your child will always make good choices that are based on the values that your family shares. An important part of discussing sexuality with your children is sharing with them what you believe. You are an extremely important person in your child's life. Ask yourself:

- Does your child know what you believe?
- Have you discussed your values about sexuality as a family?

The following chart may provide you with some things to think and talk about as a family.

### When you have a family discussion, remember to

- choose a quiet time when nobody is feeling rushed
- treat each other with respect
- really listen to each family member
- be honest
- share your reasons for the things you believe



# YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT AND WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW

## 0–2 Years of Age

### Physical

- Very rapid period of growth.

### Sexual

- Learns about love and trust through touching and holding. Becomes very responsive to physical touch and pick up non-verbal/verbal messages that begin to shape an understanding of their own sexuality.
- Exploration of genitals and other body parts. Growing awareness of excretory functions and the messages from parents and others about these functions.
- Experience awareness of genital pleasure. From birth, boys experience erections and girls lubricate vaginally.

### Developmental

- Need to establish trust and feel secure in their relationship to significant others (e.g., parents, siblings, extended family members).
- Develops an increased interest in the bodies of other people, particularly those in the same family. Feelings of curiosity and a desire to explore by touch.
- Family and other significant adults convey an attitude toward body parts, and in particular genitals. They can also build or discourage the development of trust and self-esteem in a child.

## 2–4 Years of Age

### Physical

- Slow and steady period of growth.

### Sexual

- Development of gender identity (child knows “I am a boy” or “I am a girl”).
- Body exploration with peers is common (e.g., playing doctor).
- May touch own genitals for pleasure, unless taught not to.

### Developmental

- May wish for special relationship with opposite-sex parent and compete with parent of the same sex (e.g., “I’m going to marry you”).
- More independent—sees him/herself as a separate person. Parental attitudes remain the primary source of child’s self-esteem and sense of security.
- Imitates adult behaviour.
- Amused by excretory functions and will use language that parents and siblings use. Excellent time to learn about the parts of the body and their functions.
- Some curiosity about babies, pregnancy and the birth process.
- Use of obscenities and repetition of curse words.
- Focus of pleasurable sensations shifts from the oral area (e.g., putting toys into their mouth) to the anal zone (e.g., being curious about bodily functions); therefore, toilet training becomes a major event.

### What They Need to Know

- The names for genitals: penis, testicles, scrotum, anus, vulva, labia, vagina, clitoris, uterus, and ovaries
- That reproduction happens when a man's sperm joins a woman's ovum during sexual intercourse
- That a baby grows in the uterus
- That a baby is born through the vagina
- The basics about menstrual periods and nocturnal emissions as clean and healthy processes
- Not to pick up used condoms

Preschoolers are the easiest age to teach, as they have an abundance of natural curiosity and soak up everything they hear. At this age children will use their imaginations to make up a story if they have not received an explanation they are able to understand (e.g., babies are found under cabbage patches or get dropped off by storks). Be prepared to tell the truth again and again, as preschoolers don't always understand a story the first time, or even hear all of it.

If you are silent on the topic of sexuality, it teaches children that sexuality is something your family doesn't talk about, and they are more likely to believe any story they hear from others. Give them the facts about their body parts, what they are used for and how babies are made. These facts will help to protect them in the future from the possibility of being exploited or abused, as they will be more likely to discuss sexual topics with people they trust.<sup>1</sup>

## 5–7 Years of Age

### Physical

- Slow and steady growth continues.

### Sexual

- Final stages of establishing a foundation of their gender identity. Explore adult roles by reversal play (e.g., playing house), but each child tries on different roles at certain times.
- Usually gives up the wish for a special relationship with the opposite-sex parent and seeks a stronger relationship with the same-sex parent.
- Body exploration is common. Is aware of reproduction and differences between the sexes, but may not be too interested.
- The media and family members influence understanding of male and female roles within the family, which may or may not be typical.

### Developmental

- May adopt some "bathroom vocabulary" (e.g., enjoys rhymes about diarrhea). Due in part to the influence of peers, there is a tendency to consider sexual terminology as "bad" words.
- Will ask searching questions about pregnancy, birth and babies. May ask about the father's role in reproduction. Interest in comparing animal and human behaviour.
- Begins to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

- Becomes modest about own body. Self-consciousness leads to a desire for privacy and feelings of embarrassment may be exhibited.
- Continuing development of gender identity shown by choice of leisure activities, ways in which feelings are expressed and school subjects.

### What They Need to Know

- The names for genitals: penis, testicles, scrotum, anus, vulva, labia, vagina, clitoris, uterus and ovaries
- Other scientific words: urine, stool, bladder and urethra  
That reproduction happens when a man's sperm joins a woman's ovum during sexual intercourse
- That a baby grows in the uterus and is born through the vagina
- The difference between the digestive and reproductive systems
- Basic information about menstrual periods and nocturnal emissions, and that they are a clean and healthy process
- Basic information about body changes at puberty
- Not to pick up used condoms

At this age children often think that girls have one opening for urine and feces, and that what girls eat goes into the same place as the baby grows. It would be helpful to use simple and clear explanations for your child, however it is important that you provide accurate facts and use proper terms.

### How to explain in terms they understand

**Menstruation** is the time when a girl's body begins to grow and prepare for being grown-up. The uterus prepares, too, by making a kind of bed inside itself for the baby. The bed is made of water, soft skin and a little bit of blood. Each month, when there isn't a baby, the uterus no longer needs the bed, and the extra water, skin and blood come out of the vagina.

**Nocturnal emissions** start to happen when boys are approximately eight or nine years old and their testicles begin to make sperm. Some nights, when boys are sleeping, the extra sperm comes out of their penis. Only a small amount of milky-white fluid comes out, and often looks like a wet spot on the boy's pajamas or bed sheets.

Both menstruation and nocturnal emissions are private, but not a secret.

# TIPS FOR DISCUSSING SEXUALITY WITH YOUR CHILDREN 7

- ✓ Start having open conversations as early as possible to help open the lines of communication.
- ✓ Answer questions when your child asks them—don't put them off.
- ✓ Listen carefully to the question to make sure you understand what she/he is asking.
- ✓ Use teachable moments to open discussion. Discuss and help interpret issues as they arise in TV shows, ads, music, the news and in the community. Help confirm what is meaningful, realistic and important to your sense of values.
- ✓ Don't try to cover everything at once, but don't worry if you think you have said too much.
- ✓ Your child will either sift the information, or let it pass—perhaps holding onto a phrase here or there to ask you about later.
- ✓ Keep the language simple, accurate and age appropriate (e.g., a 3-year-old may be satisfied with “babies grow in a special place inside the mother's body called a uterus”). A 6-year-old will likely have more questions about how the baby grows, and may want to know how it will come out
- ✓ Use correct terms. It is confusing for children to have cute names for some body parts and not others.
- ✓ Check what they already know. Show your willingness to discuss these by asking what they can tell you about a particular sexual topic. This encourages communication and can give you the opportunity to correct any misinformation they have.
- ✓ Let your children know what you think, and what standards of behaviour are acceptable in your house.
- ✓ It is also important to let them know what is socially appropriate/inappropriate, and what to do if they have difficulties or questions. As children mature, it is important to help them understand that other people's standards may be different from theirs.
- ✓ Don't be afraid to say, “I don't know” or to let your child know that you're embarrassed. You can say, “I feel a little uncomfortable, but this is important to talk about—let's find out some answers together.”

# FINDING RESOURCES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

This information is intended to assist you in finding agencies or organizations within your community that can help support you in raising a sexually healthy child. There are many different resources available, but it is important to choose the ones that follow your family's beliefs and values.

## Things to Think About

You may want to ask some questions to determine if an agency integrates a philosophy that provides a high quality of service and education that is comprehensive, appropriate for the age of your child, sensitive to your cultural beliefs and values and respectful of individual choices and rights.

- What is the organization's philosophy and mission?
- What types of services does it offer?
- What type of training do the employees or volunteers receive?
- How is it funded and who is it accountable to?

## Agencies that Support Sexual Health and Education

- **Community/Public Health Centres** have public health nurses who are active within their communities and schools. They provide services and information, counseling and referral regarding birth control, STIs, pregnancy options, and pregnancy and parenting. Some health centres may also have sexual health and STI clinics. A listing of community/public health centres and services provided by Alberta Health Services can be obtained by calling Health Link at 811 or online at [www.albertahealthservices.ca](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca).
- Your local schools provide sexual health teaching based on Alberta Education's curriculum. The curriculum can be accessed through [education.alberta.ca](http://education.alberta.ca).
- Your local community/public health centre may have a **community services directory** (often available through the public library), which will list community organizations and health and social agencies.
- Your community may also have **Family and Community Support Services (FCSS)** that may be able to direct you to other local agencies/resources, or help set up local partnerships that focus on prevention and enhance social and health well-being.

# Online Resources

## **Teaching Sexual Health**

[www.teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca)

A website developed by Alberta educators and health professionals. Parents are provided with resources, information and links that supplement their understanding and knowledge of healthy sexuality.

## **Healthy Parents Healthy Children**

<http://www.healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/>

Online resource developed by Alberta Health Services for families of young children.

## **Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights**

<http://www.sexualhealthandrights.ca/>

Articles about talking with your child/teen about sex, links to resources and guidelines for finding credible websites.

## **PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)**

[www.pflag.ca](http://www.pflag.ca)

Information, resources and support for parents of lesbians and gays.

## **Public Health Agency of Canada Questions and Answers: Sexual Orientation in Schools**

<http://library.catie.ca/pdf/ATI-20000s/26288E.pdf>

## **Public Health Agency of Canada Questions and Answers: Gender Identity in Schools**

<http://library.catie.ca/pdf/ATI-20000s/26289E.pdf>

## **Sexuality and U**

[www.sexualityandu.ca](http://www.sexualityandu.ca)

Provides information about puberty, talking about sex with your child, STIs and contraception.