

TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY



PARENT PACKAGE

7-12 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 preteen many things about sexuality and have been since the day he or she was born. Preteens 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

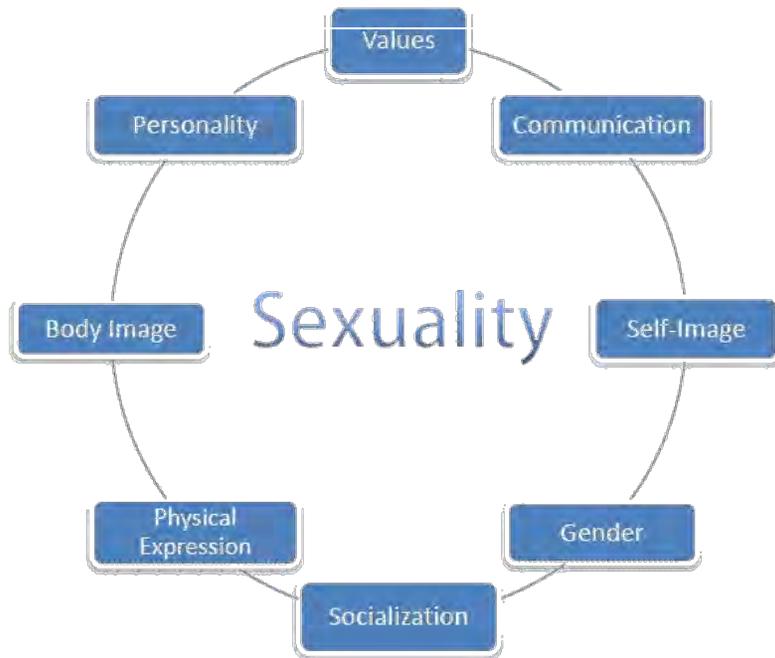
Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. Examples of sex categories are "male" and "female". The term "sex" is also often used to mean "sexual activity," but for the context of a discussion about sexuality and sexual health, the above definition is correct.

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.

Some Facts about Sexual Health Education

- In 2005, 43% of Canadian teens aged 15–19 said they'd had sexual intercourse at least once.
- Parents have reported that school-based sexual health education makes it easier for them to engage in conversations with their children as it creates natural opportunities for communication to occur and information to be shared within the home.
- Almost half of Canadian teens say they view their parents as role models and valuable sources of information.
- Most parents would like to play a role within their child's sexual health education. Some reported their motivation to do so came from a desire to provide information to their children that they wish they had received from their own parents.
- Research indicates that parent-child communication about sexuality can have a positive influence on teen sexual behaviours.
- Evaluations of comprehensive sexual health education programs (full information at appropriate ages) do not increase sexual behaviour but instead, some programs delay or decrease sexual behaviours or increase condom or contraceptive use.
- Many parents and guardians support comprehensive school-based sexual health programs, as they see schools as knowledgeable and competent sources of information for their children.
- Some youth report that they don't trust that the Internet is providing them with accurate information, but will use it to verify what they have already been told by their parents, teachers or peers.

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

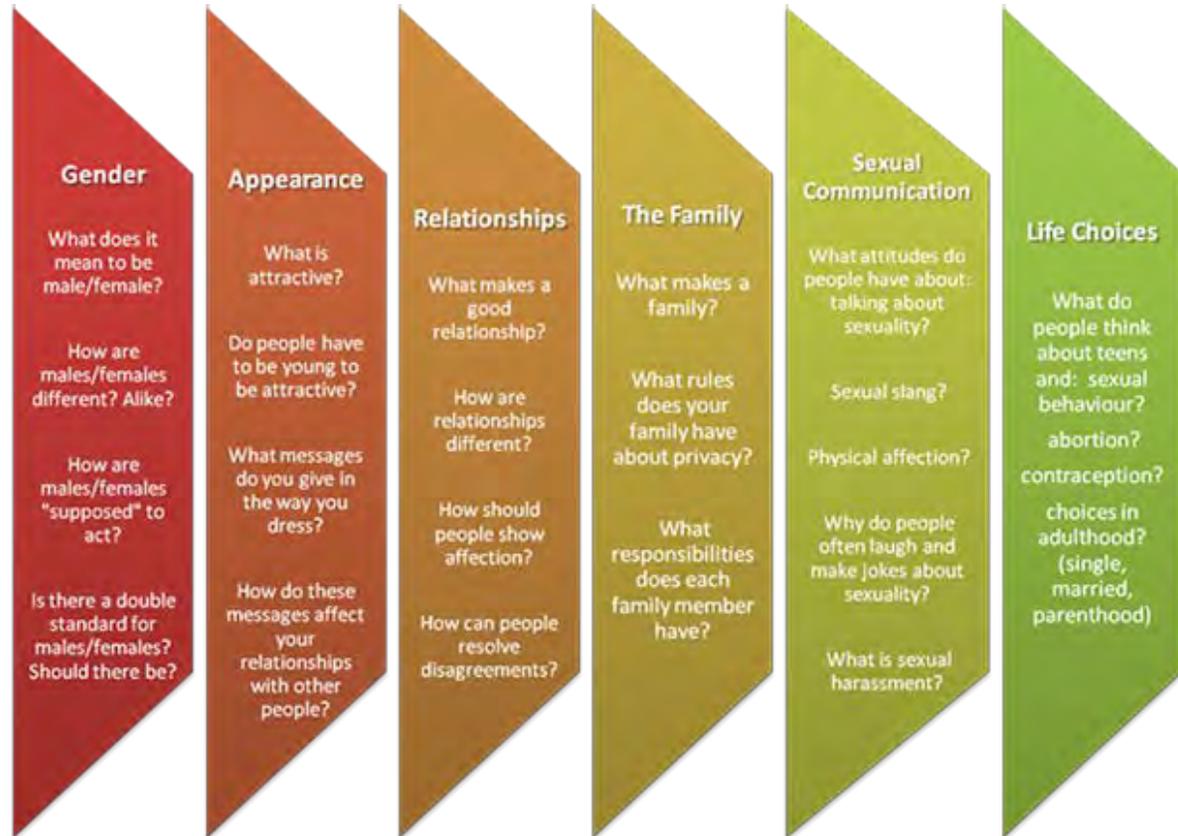
As a parent, you hope that your child will always make good choices that are based on the values that your family shares. An important part of discussing sexuality with your children is sharing with them what you believe. You are an extremely important person in your child's life. Ask yourself:

- 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 PRETEEN'S DEVELOPMENT AND WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW

7–9 Years of Age

Physical

- Slow and steady growth continues.

Sexual

- Involved in the final stages of establishing a foundation for their gender identity. Explores adult roles with reversal play (e.g., acting out the role of the opposite sex while playing house).
- 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.

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.
- Asks searching questions about pregnancy, birth and babies. May ask about the father’s role in reproduction and may show an 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
- Reproduction happens when a man’s sperm joins a woman’s ovum during sexual intercourse
- 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

How to explain in terms they will understand

Menstruation Sometime during puberty, girls’ bodies begin releasing one egg from their ovaries each month. If this egg were fertilized by male sperm, it would grow into a baby. In preparation for the fertilized egg, the uterus builds up a thick lining of blood and tissue. This lining is where the fertilized egg would grow into a baby. If the egg is not fertilized by sperm, the egg and the lining of the uterus leaves the girl’s body through her vagina and the process starts all over again.

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.

9–12 Years of Age

Preteen children are aware of, excited by, interested in and affected by the sexual aspects of their lives. These children frequently ask questions and are curious. This may be a very emotional time for children, and they may cry easily as they struggle with the transition from childhood to adolescence.

Physical

- Begins to experience the physical changes of puberty (e.g., growth of genitals, breast development, and pubic hair growth).
- Some girls begin to menstruate. Girls need to be prepared for the onset of menstruation, and boys need information regarding nocturnal emissions (or wet dreams). Events such as these can be frightening, but information given before they happen can help ease these fears. Children and teens should be informed about puberty changes that affect both males and females.
- Increase of body odours during puberty.
- Gains weight before growth spurts.

Sexual

- Peer group has increased influence on child's self-image. Primary attachments are still to members of their own sex.
- May masturbate, sometimes to orgasm.

Developmental

- Begins to separate from parents. Learns that friends can have different ideas and customs and still be friends. Together, they explore the whole range of life as they know and wonder about it.
- Physical changes and feelings can be positive; if not, feelings can include guilt, confusion and embarrassment, which results in decreased communication within the family. The result may be less support from the family.
- Responsibility around the home increases. Parents are encouraged to avoid distinguishing between separate jobs for boys versus jobs for girls. Sexual discrimination can begin at a very young age.

What they need to know

- All of the information from 0-7 years old, plus:
- Body changes that will happen during puberty
- Basic information about STIs and pregnancy
- How to question and think critically about how the media influences our perceptions around body image.
- How to talk about the ways that sexuality is portrayed falsely in the media through television, movies, magazines, music videos and computer games How sexuality is exaggerated in pornography, and how its performers are exploited
- That a teenager does not have to be sexually active

As children enter the teenage years, they generally turn to their friends for answers and information. Be approachable, it is important your child knows they can come to you when they need you.

At this age, children still have a million questions in their minds that they won't ask aloud. You can watch television or movies together and use opportunities when they present themselves to discuss the way that sexuality is presented. Car rides present great opportunities for time to talk. Use teachable moments when you are listening to songs, reading or watching the news, discussing events such as friends of the family getting married or having a baby. Have books about puberty and sexual health around the house so children know they can look at them when they want and feel comfortable doing so. Talk about "body science" rather than sex.

TIPS FOR DISCUSSING SEXUALITY WITH YOUR CHILDREN 8

- ✓ 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, and 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.
- ✓ 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.”

Opening the Lines of Communication

Providing an atmosphere where open, honest and two-way communication can take place is a major way parents can assist their children in avoiding problems with drugs, alcohol, sexual decisions and peer relationships.

To open and maintain the lines of communication between you and your preteen, we suggest the following:

- Work hard at talking with your child, not at them.
- Demonstrate responsible, health-conscious decisions with your own use of alcohol and other drugs.
- Avoid acting as if you already know everything. Be an active learner yourself.
- Stay involved in their lives to help your preteen feel connected to you. Do a variety of activities with them.

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
- Your local schools provide sexual health teaching based on Education's curriculum. The curriculum can be accessed through education.alberta.ca.
- Your community may 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

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Teaching Sexual Health

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.

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

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

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