

OUTSPOKEN

Sex Ed

Free resource for parents about how to talk openly with children, teenagers and young people

WHAT TO DO AHEAD OF TIME

- Rehearse your words in advance – especially words you aren't in the habit of saying – either verbally or in writing, and either by yourself or with a partner or friend. Practising should make you feel less uncomfortable and sound more natural
- Talk to other people about their experiences with talking to their children

HOW TO KICKSTART DISCUSSION

- Make use of opportune moments (like time spent in the car or out walking so that you can talk in parallel without necessarily having to look directly at each other)
- Use cultural prompts (like themes or scenes in a movie, a music video, overtly sexualised ads). When you're listening to music with your children, analyse the lyrics – sometimes your pointing out something explicit or objectionable will make them stop and reflect on the meaning and messages behind the words
- Connect news story topics to ethical questions about romantic and sexual relationships. Topics that news stories bring up (such as consent, sexual harassment, sexual abuse/exploitation, sexism etc) can trigger discussion about treating others with respect, advocating for people who are vulnerable and intervening if someone is at risk of being harmed
- Utilise a talk you attended, an article you read or a friend you talked to as a pretext to kickstart conversation. Say, for example: "I went to a talk about sex-ed issues and I heard _____. Have you heard of children who _____? What's been your or your friends' experience?" Show your children that you want to talk about what's happening to them and to others in the world around them
- Ask your children for information regarding a sex-ed topic. For example: "I don't understand why some kids still get bullied for being gay. Does that happen at your school too?" Asking your children questions – even if you already have a good idea of the answer – instills trust and respect for their knowledge and judgement – and will often make your children want to engage in conversation

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TALKING LITTLE AND OFTEN OVER TIME

- Explain the reason you want to talk to your children. Say: “I would like to talk about _____ because I have questions/concerns/ideas. Would that be OK?”
- Get your message across before your children get bored
- Do not shy away from your children’s questions. If the timing is inappropriate, respond positively and come back to the subject at another time or in a different way
- Never guess the answer to a question you don’t have an answer to. Inform yourself. Go off and do some research, read about the subject or talk to someone else about how to approach it, and then revisit
- It’s OK if you aren’t an expert. Admit that you aren’t sure how to discuss a topic or find it challenging to talk because communicating frankly about these topics wasn’t something you experienced while growing up
- Don’t be put off by negative response or body language. Even if children seem unreceptive and give no indication that they are listening, they may be taking in what you are saying on some level
- If children are shy or embarrassed, remember that it may be a phase. Tell them it is OK and that you can talk about it with them another time. At least by continuing to bring up topics over time, you are laying the groundwork for ongoing future communication
- It’s OK if the conversation is awkward. Even if it doesn’t go perfectly and you stumble over your words, your children will know that you are making the effort to be open and reach out, and that you want to be approachable. Try again another time
- The more normal and everyday the conversation feels – and the more matter-of-fact and confident you are in addressing topics and using words that at one time may have made you uncomfortable – the more willing your children will be to talk

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TALKING OPENLY WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

- Be proactive, not reactive. Do not wait for your children to approach you
- Be honest and age appropriate. It's about stage, not age. Go into depth if your children seem ready, and go at a pace that suits them
- Good language: use anatomically correct names for body parts so your children don't feel shame. Accurately naming body parts is also a safeguarding issue because it gives children the vocabulary to explain if something has happened to them
- Frequently point out gender stereotyping – regular debate is more likely to make lasting changes in attitudes. Question and gently challenge gender-divide comments and assumptions about toys, skills, activities, jobs, sports, personality traits. Point out pink/blue marketing ploys and how advertising targets girls with kittens, cupcakes and flirtatiousness and boys with monsters, superheroes and strength. Ask children how we “know” that girls don't/can't like construction/pirates/football or why boys don't/can't enjoy dancing/clothes/cooking. Use the word “children” rather than differentiating between girls and boys
- Talk about consent in terms of children defining their own personal space and saying when they're not comfortable. Talking openly about personal space and body parts safeguards children and equips them with an awareness of bodily autonomy and the skill set to assert themselves. Show them that they have a right to bodily autonomy by encouraging them to say “No” to stop tickling games and by not insisting that they greet people with a hug or kiss if they don't want to
- Talk about sex in the context of a loving relationship and in terms of being about mutual enjoyment (feeling close to someone, touching them, sharing good feelings)

TALKING OPENLY WITH TEENAGERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

- Be oblique. As a way in, ask your children what their friends say about porn, sexting etc. Give them the chance to talk honestly about their feelings indirectly. The question: “What advice would you give to someone about _____?” gives children the space to project about how they themselves might act or react in a tricky situation
- Discuss the differences between infatuation, intense attraction and long-term love. Help identify the components of healthy vs unhealthy relationships
- To encourage self-reflection and to find out where they are right now, ask questions about how things have changed for your children since last year such as: “Do you go online/see friends/engage with hobbies less or more? Have your favourite websites/sports/movie, book or TV characters changed? What do you now do in your spare time compared to what you did last year?”

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TALKING OPENLY WITH ANY AGE GROUP

- Be mindful of respecting your children's privacy. They may not want to talk with you about their thoughts and experiences all the time. In fact, as your children mature, they will need to forge their independence and will want to keep some things to themselves. The key is for them to know that you are there to support them if they need advice
- Frame any information you give your children in the context of love and a loving relationship so that values like trust, reciprocity, respect and communication are part of their blueprint for future relationships
- Emphasise sex positivity. Surrounded as we are by slick, unrealistic and negative sexualised images, it can be easy to forget the importance of conveying the simple message that sex is a natural, enjoyable part of life and involves mutual pleasure, closeness, communication, respect and consent
- Be gender neutral. Call out and question established beliefs about gender. Challenge gender stereotyping around abilities, skills, sports, jobs. Get into the habit of using the pronoun "they" instead of "she" or "he" – and "people" instead of "boys/men" or "girls/women" – so the implication isn't that relationships are always only about females/males. In order to blur the lines, use gender-neutral names like "Sam" and "Alex" rather than using obviously gendered names when you're giving an example. Make your language LGBT inclusive by automatically saying things like: "If a boy likes a girl – or likes a boy – then _____"
- Ask open-ended questions – rather than yes-or-no questions – to encourage your children to respond with their own knowledge and/or feelings and to see where the conversation leads
- Accentuate the positive. Say: "Tell me about a time when you _____" to reinforce the good, responsible things your children have done
- Fathers should not be afraid to talk to their daughters about sex or afraid that they will "steal their innocence". Far from it: girls with secure and supportive relationships with their fathers are not only less likely to be sexually active when they're young, but they're also less likely to be "talked into" sex. Fathers have a significant impact on their daughters' mental health and also on their future relationships
- Mothers should not be afraid to talk to their sons about sex. They also shouldn't allocate more time to talking to their daughters than to their sons. There is often a perception that daughters need more protection than sons, but in reality both boys and girls are vulnerable to the same issues, and both are curious about sex

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WHAT TO AIM FOR

- Have the conversation early and often – and over time. Think: “Little and often.” Just as parenting is a process, touching on things periodically – rather than in a one-off conversation – will pave the way for an ongoing openness
- Children will take a cue from you – if you model talking naturally about tricky issues, they will find it natural. If you are matter-of-fact and confident, they’ll be confident. So be honest with yourself about whether you have topics that are off limits. Your own reluctance, fear or sensitivity around tackling a topic can signal to your children that they should avoid talking to you about it because they don’t want to make you uncomfortable
- Aspire to being a primary resource for your children, a first port of call for them to come to if they have a sex-ed question or problem. If you are your children’s reference point, they will interpret relationships and sex issues through the prism of your values and perspective. This will help your children to be critical thinkers
- Steer your children to the right resources but do not let resources replace parenting. Include older siblings in the discussion. Leave a good informative book lying around for your children to look at in their own time
- See talking openly as a challenge, but a positive and exciting one! See it as a way to discover what vantage you yourself are coming from, what messages you are giving out and what messages you want to convey. But most importantly see talking openly as a way to build confidence and resilience in your children and to create a closer parent/child connection

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