

## Parents, Kids & Sex

As a part of my routine intake assessment, I always ask families to tell me how they talk with each other about sex and sexuality. Responses to the question are varied. Some families are very open about sexuality and speak of it on a regular basis. A lot of families have “the talk” only once and don’t bring up the subject again. And, in my experience, a considerable number of families don’t have conversations at all; reporting that they leave this discussion up to their schools.

Sexuality for a young person is ominous. Before they have become sexually active it is dangled out there beyond them as one of the last unknown frontiers. They’ve figured out many of life’s mysteries, but sexuality continues to elude them. They, therefore, go in search of an understanding and framework for what sex and sexuality is. Some of that information, especially the mechanics or biology of sex, they can get from their sex education class at school; but much of the information about sexual intimacy, the effect sex has on a relationship, and the impact it can make on your personal life are all left up in the air. What occurs are gaps in their understanding of sexuality. These gaps will be filled one way or another. They will be filled in by the media with its exploitive nature of sexuality in music videos or television. They will be filled in by their peers, who usually know very little and whose information can be more damaging than helpful. They will be filled in by pop culture with fashion trends and definitions of self worth. Often the way these gaps are being filled in is contrary to a particular family’s values about sex. The reality is, if we aren’t talking to our kids about sex, someone else is. And our kids are going to pick up messages that we don’t want them to hear.

We cannot control our kids’ behavior and decisions about sexuality, especially after a certain point. Our best hope for influence over decisions involving sexuality is to be proactive in helping them understand and define sexuality. We need to be the ones filling the information gap for them.

Here are some suggestions to getting these conversations going with your adolescents:

1) There is no shame in our sexuality. Our sexuality is a significant part of our whole being. A holistically balanced person is someone who fulfills all the aspects of their being; physical, vocational, intellectual, spiritual, relational and sexual. There is nothing to be embarrassed about, there is no need to feel ashamed. Our sexuality is a part of our gift of life. By embracing that gift we are able to address it directly.

2) The earlier you start talking to your kids about sex, the easier it will be on both of you. Speak openly and encourage questions when they are 3, 4 and 5 years old when they become inquisitive about their own bodies or curious about others.

3) It is never too late to begin the conversation, no matter how old your kids are. Look for opportunities to talk about sex. You would probably be able to find them easily if you are looking for them. Opportunities present themselves in myriad ways, but you most definitely could find them in news stories and current events, during movies and television programming and in life events of people around you. For instance, if you hear a teenager from your neighborhood is pregnant, use that as a springboard to talk about your values surrounding teen pregnancy.

4) I often hear parents say, “My child knows they can come and talk to me if they have any questions.” The truth is most kids won’t come to you. Why? Because they have so many questions they don’t know

where to start. Parents need to be proactive in their child's understanding of sexuality. Be the initiator not a passive bystander in the conversation.

As we raise our children we offer guidance and parameters for living in all aspects of their lives. However, when it comes to matters of sex and sexuality we often fall short of providing the support they need. If we allow others, i.e., media, friends, pop culture, music, etc., to fill in the gaps, we never know what they will come up with. By filling in the blanks surrounding sexuality and helping your kids understand themselves as sexual beings, you will give your kids a solid foundation and better assure yourself that your child will behave according to your family's values and act responsibly in matters of sexual activity.

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