How do I begin to talk with my children about sex? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have three young daughters (ages 8, 6, and 3 years), and I know that it is about time to begin teaching them and talking to them about sexual issues. But my mother never talked to me about such things, so I really don't know where to begin. I do need to do it soon, though, because I was molested as a child and I don't want my girls to go through the same thing, you know, thinking they have no one to talk to about such things. Because my Mother never believed me when I told her that someone had molested me, I want my girls to be able to talk to me about anything. But I am very shy and easily embarrassed by certain issues, such as sex. How can I overcome this, and how do I spark a conversation about sex with a six-year-old, what should or shouldn't she know, and how can I explain things so she will understand? Same thing for the three-year-old.

Thank you Alice,
Mary

Answer

Dear Mary,

The age old dilemma of explaining to the kids where babies come from? storks, the cabbage patch, Kansas? and answering sexual and reproductive questions of young, inquisitive children may seem challenging and embarrassing to many parents and caregivers. Not knowing when or where to start, how much information to share, and how to not make it awkward are all common concerns when it comes to the birds, the bees, and the body parts. Luckily, you're already off to a great start with your intent to create and maintain an open, honest dialogue with your children. Keep reading for possible next steps and some resources to help you share information with your children that's accurate and developmentally appropriate!

As you mentioned, you'd like for your children to be able to talk to you about anything? being a parent your children feeling comfortable coming to is key in building honest conversations about sex. To be an ?askable? parent, here are some tips:

- Listening (first and foremost!) to their questions, comments, and concerns.
- Being okay with not having all the answers to your children?s questions. It's okay to say "I don't know." You could find the answer together!
- Treating your children?s questions seriously.
• Using an open-minded, calm, and non-judgmental approach.
• Acknowledging your own discomfort with sexual questions and explaining it to your children.
• Being prepared with correct and age-appropriate answers.

Listed adapted from American Sexual Health Association [2].

Research shows that having frank chats with your children early on doesn’t encourage them to have sex. Instead, you’re creating a dialogue with openness and trust that can hopefully continue throughout their pre-teens, adolescence, and into young adulthood.

As for how to talk to your children, it doesn’t have to be done all at once as one “the talk”. It may be helpful to have a series of small conversations by using “teachable moments” (such as when your kid points out a pregnant belly) as learning opportunities. When you’re having these talks, you can try:

• Using age-appropriate vocabulary, which can help you to avoid oversharing.
• Adapting information to fit your family’s religious, cultural, or other needs.
• Teaching them the correct names of body parts and what they do.
• Acknowledging how communication and respect are a part of sex, reproduction, and relationships.
• Discussing both the dos and don’ts; for example, if you say “don’t get pregnant”, try following up with “dos” about safety and protection. So, for older children, “if and when you’re ready to have sex, do use a condom.”
• Reading books together that are written to teach children about sex.
• Reinforcing your support for your children by letting them know you’re open to talking about any of their questions, feelings, or experiences.


For more specific suggestions on age-appropriate messages about many sexuality-related topics, you might want to take a look at the tips and information available from the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States [5] (SIECUS). Additionally, Advocates for Youth [6] has helpful resources that may aid you in planning what messages are appropriate for your children at each developmental stage.

With the embarrassment you described about sexual topic areas, you may find it beneficial to seek support in processing your past experience with sexual abuse if you haven’t done so already. You’re not alone in your shyness and discomfort; many adult survivors have struggles with intimacy and relationships and may even feel guilty or blame themselves for their past trauma. Therapy [7] is one method to consider, as well as reading books about healing, attending support groups, or talking with a trusted friend, spiritual leader, mental health professional, or health care provider.

Your children are lucky to have a parent so committed to their health, safety, and happiness. You can do this! You may even see and seize a “teachable moment” today.

Alice!
Category:
Relationships [8]
Culture, Race, Religion, & Family [9]
Let's talk about sex, baby
Definition of sex?
Definitions of bases? and I'm not talking baseball

Resources
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Medical Services (Morningside)
Mental Health Service (CUMC)
Medical Services (CUMC)

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