

CHILDREN AND SEXUAL EDUCATION

By Ilze van der Merwe-Alberts, educational psychologist and presenter of the well-known talk, *How and When to Tell Your Children About the Birds and the Bees*. She is also the co-author of the best-selling book, *Easy Answers to Awkward Questions* (Metz, 2009) with creative parenting expert, Nikki Bush.

The most frequently asked questions from parents about their children's sexual education:

Question 1: What is the appropriate time and age to do sexual education with my children?

Answer: Inform your children when they ask questions or show an interest. In other words look for teachable moments and be an approachable parent. I believe that it is appropriate for children to be sexually educated by the age of 6 as the child is by this stage going into a next developmental phase and they are starting to become more embarrassed and cautious in asking their questions. The rule of thumb is "small amount of information for small kids and bigger amount of information for bigger kids". Another rule of thumb is that children should have the basic knowledge about sexuality at age 6.

Question 2: My child has never asked a sexual question. How do I talk to my child about sexuality?

Answer: Children ask questions verbally and non-verbally and parents must look for both types of questions. A verbal question is "how are babies born?" and a non-verbal question is for instance when a young child peeps under the dress of a pregnant woman to see what is making her tummy so big. The wise parent will answer their kids directly and concretely because children have the right to know. Parents can also approach the subject by showing their child photo's of when the child was born/newly born and use that as a starting point. A parent can also say to their child "remember when you wanted to know....., well I want to tell you now".

The more relaxed and natural the parent approaches it, the more natural and relaxed the child will receive it. Children also tend to ask their sexual kind of questions in the car (where there is no eye contact and the parent cannot disappear) or in a more intimate situation like around bath time. Parents can also use a book (like "Easy answers to awkward questions" for children 8-12 or "Where do I come from" for children 4-8) and read it with their children and use the time they are sharing with their child to give more detailed and personal information. When parents focus on teachable moments, they will discover more than what they ever realized before.

Question 3: Do I tell girls about boys and boys about girls and do I tell my kids together or separately?

Answer: Boys should know about girls and girls should know about boys as gender is part of life and of their world. You can tell your children separately or together. It all depends on the personality and ages of your children. If you have a child who is curious and shows more interest in sexual issues and your other child is shy and withdrawn when the topic is raised, the more curious child can make it easier for both parent and shy child by their openness. Older children should be given more detail but if your younger child is exposed to the conversation, your younger one will only retain what is appropriate for their age and the rest will be lost. The best way to tell is open, honest, comfortable and direct. Use teachable moments and show your children that you are approachable and willing to share knowledge. Moms can tell their boys and girls and dads can tell their boys and girls. The best parent to tell is the willing parent.

Question 4: Why must I talk to my children about the birds and the bees?

Answer: We live in a world where our children are exposed to more information than any parent had to deal with when they were younger. Our children are living in a global village and no child is immune against information. All children are sexual beings and all children are curious about themselves, their bodies and how things work. A seven year old said to me "so what is the big deal? Children have the right to know" after her parents shared sexual knowledge with her. Our children talk to each other, they share experiences and knowledge, they play out their experiences and curiosities and children feel they have the right to know about their bodies, their lives and about sexual issues. If we do not talk to our children, they learn from each other and the information is usually not shared between children in an appropriate nice way but rather in a sensational shocking way. I encourage parents to take up the responsibility to share all knowledge with their children in a beautiful loving way.

Question 5: How do I handle sexualized play and what is age appropriate sexualized play?

There are five categories of normal childhood sexual play that we see most children engage in:

PLAYING DOCTOR

This age old game is one of the most frequently reported childhood sexual games. It is where the one child pretends to be the doctor or nurse and the other child is the patient. This is merely the framework where the removal of clothes and examination of bodies, especially the genitals, is permitted.

EXPOSURE

This game involves exposing parts of one's body to each other. It is different from playing doctor in that there is little or no use of pretend play associated with it.

EXPERIMENTING WITH STIMULATION

This is game in which children explore physical contact especially of the genitals. This game often involves some physical arousal.

KISSING GAMES

The main event of this game is kissing.

FANTASY SEXUAL PLAY

Children often rehearse adult roles of parent, mother, boss, employee, and in some of these games, they even pretend to have sexual intercourse. Like in the doctor game, children seem to use fantasy merely as a framework for experimenting with sexual stimulation. In fantasy play involving initiation of adult sex, children create elaborate fantasies to accompany their sex play. Some scenes can be based on what they have actually witnessed themselves either by witnessing intimacy between adults or witnessing sexual intercourse on movies or on television. A child will not play sexual intercourse games if the child has not been exposed to sexual intercourse in any of the already mentioned ways.

Question 6: When do I stop being naked in front of my children and when must my children stop bathing together or bathing with parents?

Answer: Parents can be naked in front of their children as long as both parents and children are comfortable with it. The first sign that anyone is feeling shy or uncomfortable is the sign that parents should respect the boundaries the child is communicating or parents should respect their own boundaries. Children will show a discomfort or they will hide their nakedness from others as a sign of discomfort. The moment one child is showing a resistance or discomfort in showing nakedness or seeing another naked the parents should respect the privacy of the child. Even if the child is six years old, knock before entering their bathroom as a sign of respect.

Question 7: Why must I prepare my child for puberty and adolescence?

Answer: Puberty and adolescence take both the parent and the teenager on an emotional roller coaster. During and after adolescence, there is a marked upsurge in sexual activity in both sexes. There is a rapid increase in the incidence of dating so that by age 16 years, over 70% of boys and over 85% of girls would have experienced dating (Schofield, 1965). As this research figures were found in 1965 parents can be assured that the statistics would have increased significantly. The figures for kissing are closely similar and, again, boys lag behind girls in the age at which they start. Deep kissing and breast fondling occurs somewhat later, but by 17 years of age, the majority of adolescents will have progressed to this stage of sexuality. After 15 years of age, the

curve of sexual experience rises fast. At 15 years, less than a fifth of boys would have touched the genitals of girls but at 17 years, nearly half would have done this. By the age of 18, about a third of boys and a sixth of girls would have had sexual intercourse. In keeping with their slower physical development, boys begin sexual activities later than girls, but by 17 there is no longer any difference. Boys and girls who start dating and kissing at an early age are more likely to have early sexual intercourse. Fewer girls have intercourse but once they have started they are more active sexually. Boys tend to have more sexual partners whereas girls tend to have an enduring sexual association. Girls tend to look for a romantic relationship whereas boys seek a sexual adventure.

We should tell our boys and girls that the sexual feelings and yearnings they will feel during and after the puberty period can be "powerful, mysterious and at times very uncomfortable" (Stanton and Jones, 1993). Of the most troubling but common experiences of teens is to feel sexual arousal in unexpected ways. Boys may feel sexual attraction to girls they don't like, feel are unattractive, or even to a sister, cousin or friend. Jokes, TV commercials, or magazine advertisements can turn them on. Boys and girls in adolescence can even be attracted to or have a sexual response when they hear about homosexual acts or think about a girl or boy's body. It is crucial to normalize this for our teens. They should be warned about these experiences and told not to worry about them. Such occasional feelings are to be expected and will eventually be resolved.

Schofield's research is showing that many youth's of both sexes do not enjoy their first sexual experience of intercourse. Peer pressure, overexposure to sexualized information, stupidity and lack of knowledge can be a trap for children. The role that we, as parents, play in the sexuality of our children is both tricky and vast. It is a job as important as the rest of our parenting roles.

Question 8: How do I sleep at night knowing my children are safe among all the opportunities to be exposed to sexual issues on internet, magazines, cell phones, etc?

Answer: The most important aspect of any sexual education is for parents to remember that there is nothing as important as the relationship they have with their children. Parents should strive to be approachable and open to the world of their children. Wise parents will get to know the world of their children, the music they listen to, the topics they are interested in and the world they are exposed to. Parents should get to know Facebook, Mixit and the new technology our children are exposed to and instead of condemning it parents should embrace the world of the children and not only see it as evil and bad but also as good and expanding. An informed parent should know the pros and cons of what their children are exposed to and discuss both sides. The more parents condemn the world of the teens, the more the gap between parent and child will grow. Talk to children about the dangers and help them to learn to make wise choices. For instance explain the danger of watching pornography on internet. It can easily lead to an addiction and anti-social behaviour. Parents can sleep at night, knowing that their

children are in a close loving relationship with them and that the parents give their children knowledge, not preaching.

Question 9: How can parents handle their children's masturbation?

Answer: Many parents are surprised and shocked when they find out that their children are masturbating, but masturbation is quite common in young children. In most cases, it is considered a natural and normal behaviour in children of all ages. Children often begin masturbating at around eighteen months of age. It is quite common for babies to masturbate on their bottles or toys. Masturbation tends to peak when children are between the ages of three and five. It then declines in frequency until puberty.

Children masturbate for the following reasons:

- **Pleasure.** Children learn very quickly that it feels good to masturbate. Children do not masturbate with sex in mind, but rather because it feels good.
- **Self-soothing.** For many children, masturbation reduces tension. These children may masturbate when they are upset, tired, bored, or feeling stress. Parents with boys will often notice how their boys are touching their private parts as a form to self sooth when they are anxious or insecure. Children often masturbate as a form of self-soothing to help them to fall asleep.
- **Exploration.** Many children will masturbate as part of the natural curiosity they have about their bodies. Children are sexual beings from birth and they are comfortable to explore their sexuality until around the age of 6 years. After the age of 6 years, most children become aware that they must keep their sexual explorations secret or private to avoid embarrassment.

How can parents handle their children's masturbation?

It is important for parents not to overreact:

- Ignore it. Masturbation is, after all, a normal behaviour for most children. Parents can best handle it by treating it matter-of-factly. Parents shouldn't try to get their children to stop masturbating by punishing, threatening or scolding. If they do, they run the risk of giving their children the idea that their genitals are bad and/or dirty.
- Remain calm. Parents should try not to overreact. They should also keep in mind that no physical harm will come to their children as a result of masturbation. If parents overreact, they may put fear into their children about their bodies. Parents can gently remind their child that private parts are not for touching in public and that the child must only touch and play with their own private parts when they are private, eg in their bedroom or in their bathroom.
- Don't be surprised. Masturbation among young children is very common, and quite normal. Tell your child that it feels nice for all people; adults and children to touch their private parts and lots of adults and children do it, but it must be in private.

- Offer alternatives. Parents should provide their children with something else to do with their hands while they are in public. They could also try to distract their children from masturbating by suggesting some other activity.
- Be consistent. If children, for example, masturbate while they are at school, parents should work out a solution with their children's teacher. It is important that the behaviour be treated in the same way by parents and by other care providers.

What are red lights for parents and help is needed?

In some instances, children's masturbation habits may be an indicator of other problems. Parents should consult with a professional if:

- Children's masturbation interferes with their social interactions.
- Techniques to eliminate public masturbation have failed.
- Parents have any concerns about their children's well-being.
- Parents feel that their children are possibly not masturbating, but scratching or rubbing the genital area because of discomfort. It may be possible that such children have an infection or a rash.
- Masturbation is constant and people are often making comments about your child's behaviour.
- Parents should keep in mind that in most cases, masturbation is a common, normal behaviour in children. It is not necessary an indicator of some other problem.

For more information visit: www.bellavidacentre.co.za or purchase a copy of *Easy Answers to Awkward Questions* [here](#).