

*For parents, the conversations about sexuality that you have with your children are some of the most important conversations that will happen during their lifetime. Adults often worry about talking about sexuality with children and, although they recognize the value in the conversations, it can be difficult to approach the topics of sexuality.*

**Here are ten tips that will help make these conversations relevant and comfortable for all involved.**

*These tips have been generously provided by Jennifer Gibson, Community Education Services Coordinator with Island Sexual Health Society*

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1. **Start early** – It's **never too early** to begin offering basic and factual information about sexuality to children (but in an age appropriate way). Using the correct anatomical names for the personal and private parts of our bodies is a great way to start.  
  
For example, while bathing a young child, identify parts such as penis, scrotum, testicles, vulva, vagina, and clitoris just as you would elbow, knee, and ear. This helps children respect and relate equally to all parts of their bodies and learn the correct terminology. Children who have been taught to use the correct terminology for their genitals are more resistant to abuse, feel more positively connected to their bodies, and are able to ask for help (including health care) more confidently.
2. **Talk often** – The more often we talk honestly and openly about sexuality, the more natural and comfortable these conversations become. Instead of saving up all of the information (and anxiety) for one pressure-filled talk, **use the many moments in everyday life** that provide opportunities to discuss sexuality. Encouraging children to ask questions helps to build their confidence and comfort. Talking often also allows humour to enter the conversation and ease any awkward moments.
3. **Balance the talking and listening** – Allow space for children to think about what you're saying and to **ask questions**. Be aware of the child's interest level – they are really good at telling you when they're done with the conversation and they're ready to move on. Always thank your children for the conversations you've had before moving on. Remember, you can (and should) continue the conversation at a later time.

4. **Educate yourself** – The more current your information is, the more help you’ll be able to offer your children and the better you’ll be able to answer any questions they have. Explore the **latest information** on birth control, sexually transmitted infections, sexual decision making, and sexuality and technology. This includes knowledge about local sexual health services and reputable websites that will keep you current and help youth form their own community resource networks.
  
5. **Use teaching supports** – Resources such as **books, DVDs, and websites** can help to support (*not replace*) your conversations. This can be especially helpful for parents and children who may be developing comfort with the topics around sexuality. Books offer a great source of information and can be read together. These resources should then be left for children to refer back to in their own private time.  
  
Many parents take their children to the library or bookstore to choose the book together they feel will be the best fit for their needs. If you aren’t able to speak with your child about sexuality, identify someone (family member, friend, health care professional) who your child can speak with in confidence. Some parents will also find it helpful to **connect with other parents** who can offer strategies and resources – you are not alone in this!
  
6. **Utilize popular culture** – Popular culture, especially the media, has a large effect on our attitudes and values around sexuality. It’s difficult to engage in popular media without receiving messages about sexuality, so why not use such messages as teachable moments and connect them to cultural values and beliefs? **TV shows, music, social media, and movies** can provide great points of discussion with older youth. Talking about the issues through the media can be an excellent way to communicate about sexuality in a non-threatening way and keep the conversations more closely linked to their current realities.
  
7. **Pay attention to your body language** – How you speak about sexuality is as important as what you’re saying. In an ideal world, we’d be able to **choose a relaxed time** to have these conversations. In the real world, these conversations often present themselves at less than ideal times. If possible, choose a time to have these conversations when you do not feel stressed or rushed. Parents and children often say that it’s easier to talk about sexuality when eye contact is optional. Talking while driving, walking, or doing household chores can provide a great opportunity for comfortable conversations with optional eye-contact.

8. **Sex Ed at school** – Find out what’s being taught to your children at school. This knowledge helps you prepare your children so they can be as comfortable as possible during these lessons. It also allows you the opportunity to **continue these conversations at home**, to situate the information given within your family’s values and beliefs, and to assert yourself as an important sexuality resource in their lives.
  
9. **Alternative communication** – Consider other ways to communicate with youth who may be uncomfortable with or resistant to face-to-face communication. Introduce an alternative to real time talking such as having a **question journal** – a journal in which the youth leaves a question to be answered by the adult. The adult answers the question and leaves the journal to be read.  
  
For the more digitally connected youth, **texting** can be a more casual but effective way to communicate with older youth. You can also supplement the texting with **links to appropriate websites** so youth can use them in their own time.
  
10. **Listen without judgment** – Listen to what your children are saying and asking without rushing them. Communicate your values and beliefs to your children in an open way and work to **accept their values and beliefs** even if they differ from yours. Explain your perspective and ask them to explain theirs.

*Remember that you are your children’s first sexuality teacher and you can be their best resource on sexuality. Youth value their parents and other adults in their lives as sources of sexual health information. Access to accurate sexual health information and positive role models helps everyone to make the best sexual decisions possible.*

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