

When Dads Talk about the Birds & Bees

- Dr. Yvonne K. Fulbright

It's one of the best and most honorable questions a man can ask. How do I talk to my child about sex? Dads regularly ask me how they can get involved with sex education efforts. They want to be that resource for their child. They need to be. Children want them to be such. So how does a dad get started?

Quite frankly, an article can't do this topic justice. So in getting started, a father should read a great book on this topic or download my audio CD, "Who Better than You? Educating Your Child about Sex, Love & Relationships." But, in a nutshell, both dads – and moms - need to do the following in creating a supportive climate for their children to learn about sexuality matters...

Face Yourself First

We all have values, attitudes, and beliefs when it comes to sexuality, but have you ever taken the time to really examine yours? You need to know where you stand on matters, and most important why. Your kids want to know where you're coming from. It's one thing to deliver a fact or to state "don't do this" or "I want you to do that." But the information you transmit is going to have a much greater impact when you can explain to your child where you're coming from.

Scrutinize Your Personal Life

Don't underestimate the impact your personal life can have on your child for better or for worse. Your child is not immune to your romantic relationship(s) and is picking up a lot whether you're partnered or single. So model the behavior you want instilled in your child. Seek to have a healthy relationship your child will want to mirror.

Be prepared.

One of the most common comments you'll hear from parents when it comes to their child's sex education is "I wasn't expecting that!" Expect everything. Your child may ask a question anytime, anywhere, including out in public. Don't let a lack of preparation foil your efforts. Utilize your resources. Acquire factual information from reliable sources. The more you know about a subject, the more comfortable you will feel discussing it.

Always use proper terminology and establish a common language.

Define your terms so that you and your child understand one another. You need to make sure that you're speaking the same language. You must be explicit about meanings of words like sex, virginity, and abstinence. Teens have been known to claim virginity status, for example, while still engaging in anal sex.

Never avoid answering a question.

Many parents get caught off guard by sex questions, laughing, changing the subject, or simply saying, "What???" When you avoid the question, pretend not to hear, change the subject, or lie, you are missing opportunities to educate. If you don't know the answer,

admit such and offer to look into the matter. Then follow up. Remember that if someone is old enough to ask, she or he is old enough to hear the correct answer and to learn the correct word(s).

Be proactive.

Don't wait for your child to come to you. Create the time to talk in a supportive environment. Many children will never ask questions. You can't risk letting your child go uninformed.

Take advantage of “teachable moments.”

You will have plenty of chances to talk about sex if you recognize them. Examples of situations that can springboard you into conversation include while watching a TV show, bath times, or when you see pregnant a woman... Openers for conversations can be as easy as: “Have you ever noticed...?” or “This has been all over TV...”

Start early, with simple concepts first.

Your child is sexual pre-birth and for the rest of his/her life. So the learning needs to start right away. What you share will be dependent upon your child's knowledge, interests, and behaviors at a particular age.

Don't preach, judge, or moralize, and watch your tone.

Parents' attempts to impart sexuality information to their children tends to be a “top down” communication style. This denies teenagers the opportunity to share their own thoughts, feelings, and desires, or to draw links between their own perspectives with that of their parents.'

Don't rule out the power of self-disclosure.

Many parents wonder if sharing their own values, thoughts, attitudes, and especially personal experiences are necessary. Self-disclosure, by far, enhances your efforts, especially when you consider that most children grow up to adopt a value system fairly similar to their parents'.

Practice active listening.

You can do this by encouraging conversations with statements like:

- “I'm glad you told me about that.”
- “Tell me more.”
- "That's a good question."
- “What questions do you have?”
- “How does that make you feel?”
- “It sounds like you're saying...”
- “What would you do in that situation?”
- “What advice would you give?”

Don't approach childhood sexuality as a “problem.”

Sex is a fact and a part of life. You need to avoid shame-based reactions that can make your child feel guilty or in the wrong. You need to acknowledge that your child is a

sexual being and stay real about her circumstances and desires. Being sex positive and realistic does not mean that you're being permission-giving. A parent can talk about sex in a healthy light, stating that it is a wonderful part of life with joys, but that that can only be realized with smarts and good decision-making.

Don't assume your child is like everyone else's.

Even within the same family, no two children are alike. The approach you take needs to be individually tailored to fit your child's needs, personality, questions, circumstances, etc.

Develop your child's self-esteem.

Children who are self-confident are likelier to make healthy decisions. They're also better able to overcome peer pressure, say "no" to unwanted behaviors, including sexual advances and drug use. You can begin this process by regularly praising your child when it comes to her talents, his honesty, her good decision-making, his kindness, her effort, his independence, her ability to take on responsibility... You can show interest in your child's life, making the effort to have a close relationship and to stay involved.

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