

Strategies for Communicating About Sexuality with Your Kids or Teens

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Over the last twenty-two years of teaching sexuality education in the San Francisco Bay Area, I have collected many effective strategies from parents about communicating with their kids about sexuality. I am grateful for their input, and I am sharing some of their best suggestions with you.

- *Though these tips are presented as parents talking/interacting with their own children, many of these tips can be implemented by any adult to the kids and teens in their lives. A kid can never have enough caring adults in their lives, so if you are a cool auntie or uncle, older cousin, older sibling, or trusted family friend, you can use these communication tips too.*

1. Keep Your Answers to About Two Sentences

When a kid asks a question about sex or reproduction, many parents think, “OK, here comes the Big Talk.” Then the parent launches into a long discussion until the kid’s eyes glaze over. The most natural way to handle the questions is to address the question being asked at face value and try to condense your answer into about two sentences. This brevity is particularly important for younger kids, whose attention span may be short, and who often simply just wants a word defined or wants a quick factual answer. If parents keep their answers short, this pattern invites a conversation with their children rather than a long one-sided lecture. One of the best strategies that I have heard was from a parent who shared that she “puts on her imaginary lab coat” whenever her 10 year old daughter asks a question about sexuality. The imaginary lab coat helps her to put on a scientist’s persona and focus on a few biological facts when answering questions.

2. Get Your Kid to be Your Ally

Many parents may not be comfortable discussing sexuality issues with their kids, but many feel like they have to appear to be the authority on the subject. If you start out by admitting to your kids that you are nervous talking to them about sexuality, and that they need to encourage you, they are more likely to be empathetic and share in the discussion rather than feel as if you are lecturing to them.

A mother, whose daughter I had taught from 6th-8th grades, wanted to be the one to talk with her daughter about sex but was extremely nervous. She confessed to her daughter that while she was speaking about sex, she was probably going to turn red, start sweating, and probably would not be able to look her in the eye. In fact, she was so flustered that the only way she could finish talking was to turn her chair around to talk to the wall rather than look at her daughter! Nonetheless, she got through that first conversation about sex with her daughter’s encouragement, and the subtext that her daughter received was that mom made it a priority to talk with her about sex despite mom’s fears and discomfort. They have had many subsequent conversations, which had gotten easier with practice.

3. The Car is a Great Place to Talk About Sex

When you are driving, you are focused on the driving and looking ahead. If a kid asks a sexuality question then, many parents find it easier to talk about sex when not making direct eye contact. Driving carpool also seems to provide parents with plenty of details about the puberty and relationship drama that is happening among your kid’s friends. Kids and teens are much more open when their own parent is not present, so the driver may get an earful. Lastly, driving around with your child allows a parent to comment on the multiple billboards and the way the media portrays sexuality, masculinity, femininity, and beauty. You might also comment on a news story on the radio that touches upon some aspect of sexuality whether the news is talking about transgender issues, same-sex marriage, a new birth control method, or a political candidate’s stance on abortion rights. If you listen to pop music, there is plenty to dissect with the graphic sexual lyrics in many songs. As you comment, you are just “thinking out loud”, not requiring your kids’ input but they are definitely listening.

4. Continue the Cuddling with Your Kids

Parents may be less physically demonstrative with their kids as they grow into teens. Particularly, dads tell me they are less comfortable hugging their developing daughters. Although teens can be more aloof than when they were kids, this is a normal developmental phase during which they are separating and individuating from their parents. Teens may experience a “push-pull” relationship with their parents where they want to be babied one moment and then treated like an adult the next. Though sometimes challenging, I encourage parents to be steadfast in offering affectionate touch to their kids in the forms of cuddles, hugs, kisses, etc. Parents should help teens acknowledge the difference between affectionate touch and sexual touch. Teens who are deprived of affectionate touch from a safe source, such as family, may seek out any human touch, including riskier sexual touch.

5. Teach about Touch & Consent

Consent is not just about sex! Asking permission or coming to an agreement is something kids have done their whole lives. A mom shared with me that when her son was only 3 years old, and he would say “stop!” during a tickle fight in between screams and giggles, she would immediately stop the tickling, raise her hands, and validated what he had just asked for – “you said stop, so I’m going to stop.” This sends a powerful message about having agency over one’s own body and an authority figure respecting their request. Parents and guardians should never force kids into hugs and kisses, even with relatives. Ask other adults to practice asking for hugs from your child. Teach your child it is ok to say “No” and to teach them to negotiate for less intimate touches, such as handshakes or high-fives, that they may be more comfortable with.

6. Give Your Teen a Choice in Physical Affection.

One of the principals I work with shared this great tip:

After years of telling her teenage son to be respectful of other people’s boundaries and to have others respect his boundaries, she decided that it was important for her to practice what she preached with him. She said to him, “Son, I love you, and I want to demonstrate that every day to you in a physical way, but I want you to tell me what you’re comfortable with for each day.” On that first day, he said, “OK, I’m good with a fist-bump.” Though a little disappointed, she respected the request. A couple of days later, he approached her and said, “Today, I’d really like a hug.”

7. Continue Childhood Night-Time Rituals

a. Tuck-in time: Bed time is often when kids/teens reflect on the events of the day. This is when kids are more likely to ask you a question, especially when the lights are dimmed, they are tired and their defenses are lowest. If you are present to tuck them in and perhaps prompt them with the question, “anything you want to chat about before you go to sleep?”, they may bring their issues up.

b. Good Night Kiss: Parents may phase out the good-night kiss as their kids get older, but continuing the ritual will pay dividend as kids get older. You may be able to negotiate curfew with the good-night kiss. If your teen wants to stay at a party that ends at midnight but you want them home earlier, you could say, “you know I got to sleep at 11pm, and I would like my good night kiss from you before I sleep.” Teens will take this message better if parents explain the subtext that they can only go to sleep soundly knowing their kids are home safe. In addition, if your teens give you a kiss on the cheek, you can smell anything that is on their breath such as pot, cigarettes, alcohol that could alert you to high-risk behaviors early.