Prayas (Health Group)

GUIDE 3 OF 3

# What Should You Talk About?

*A practical guide for parents and caregivers*

## At a glance

- ✓ Talking about sexuality is more than one conversation. It covers eight connected parts of growing up.
- ✓ Prepare yourself too: practise the words, use reliable resources and think about the values you want to share.
- ✓ Keep three things separate: health facts, family values, and respect and safety.
- ✓ You do not need perfect words. A calm, honest conversation that continues over time is better than silence.
- ✓ The goal: your child knows, ”I can ask, I can learn, and I can come to my parent or another trusted adult when I need help.”

## The eight themes

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| 1 Relationships | 2 Values, rights and culture | 3 Gender | 4 Violence and staying safe |
| 5 Skills for health and well-being | 6 The human body and development | 7 Sexuality and sexual behaviour | 8 Sexual and reproductive health |

## In this guide


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## 1. It is more than one conversation

When people hear “sexuality education”, they may think it means talking to children about sex. It is much broader than that. It includes learning about the body, growing up, feelings, friendships, gender, respect, safety, relationships, and health. Children learn about these things from family members, school, friends, television, films, phones, social media and the world around them—whether adults talk about them or not.

You do not need to explain everything at once. What you say will depend on your child’s age and questions, what they see and experience, and what you want them to understand. It also depends on your own comfort and the values you want to share. The aim is not to make every parent speak in exactly the same way. It is to help children grow up with accurate information, respect for themselves and others, and the confidence to seek help.

In this guide, the eight themes are based on the international guidance on sexuality education developed by UNESCO and United Nations partners. The names have been simplified. You do not have to remember the names. Think of them as eight connected parts of growing up.

## 2. Before you begin: prepare yourself, too

Many parents were never told the correct names for body parts, never had a conversation about periods or wet dreams, and were taught that such topics should not be discussed openly. You may feel embarrassed, unsure of the words to use, or worried that talking about a topic will encourage a child to try something. These feelings are understandable. You do not have to wait until you feel completely comfortable—but a little preparation can help.

- Think about what you want your child to learn. For example: to understand their body, know what is normal, respect other people’s boundaries, recognise unfair treatment, and come to you if they are worried.
- Practise saying the words aloud before talking with your child. Words such as penis, vulva, breasts, periods, erection and wet dream may feel unfamiliar at first. Use simple, correct words without making them sound dirty or shameful. You can use familiar language alongside the correct word if that helps.
- Use reliable resources. A child-friendly book, a trusted health professional, or a credible educational video can help you learn and can also give you a way to begin a conversation.
- If you do not know an answer, say, “I am not sure. Let us find out together.” Avoid guessing or passing on a frightening story or myth.
- Think about your own values. What matters to you about respect, relationships, marriage, faith, privacy, equality and responsibility? You can share these values and explain why you hold them, while also giving accurate information and making space for questions.
- Notice what you learned about being a girl, boy, woman or man. Were girls expected to do more housework? Were boys told not to cry? Were daughters given more restrictions than sons? You may choose to keep some family practices, but it is worth asking whether a rule is fair, safe and respectful to every child.

You do not need perfect words. A calm, honest conversation that can continue over time is more useful than silence caused by fear of saying the wrong thing.

## 3. The eight themes: what they mean and why they matter

### Theme 1. Relationships: family, friendship and care

Children learn what relationships are like by watching how people at home speak to each other, share work, disagree, apologise and show care. They need to know that families can look different and that relationships should include respect, kindness and responsibility.

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| **Ages 2–5** | Name people and relationships in the child's life. Teach kindness, taking turns, and that people can show care in different ways. Avoid suggesting that every family must look the same. |
| **Ages 6–10** | Talk about friendship, being left out, arguments, making up, and how to treat people fairly. Explain that a friend should not force, threaten or repeatedly tease or bully someone. |
| **Ages 11–14** | Discuss changing friendships, group pressure, crushes, jealousy and the wish to fit in. Talk about how to respond respectfully when someone likes you—or does not like you back. Provide skills for assertive communication. |
| **Ages 15–18** | Discuss trust, love, commitment, break-ups, controlling behaviour and what makes a relationship healthy or unhealthy. Share your views about relationships and explain the reasons behind them. |

### Theme 2. Values, rights, culture and sexuality: what matters to us, and why

Families and communities have beliefs about modesty, marriage, relationships, religion, privacy and what children should know at different ages. Children need help understanding these values, while also learning that every person has dignity, rights and a right to safety.

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| **Ages 2–5** | Teach simple ideas: be kind, do not hurt others, and tell a trusted adult if something feels wrong. Explain privacy without calling body parts or questions dirty. |
| **Ages 6–10** | Explain family rules and their reasons. Children may notice that adults disagree. Tell them that people grow up with different beliefs, and questions can be asked respectfully. |
| **Ages 11–14** | Discuss how family, religion, culture, media and friends shape ideas about what girls and boys "should" do. Help them ask whether a rule is fair and how it affects different people. |
| **Ages 15–18** | Talk openly about your values regarding relationships, sex, marriage and responsibility. Explain your reasons, listen to your teenager's perspective, and distinguish your family's beliefs from health facts and other people's rights. |

## Theme 3. Gender: being a girl, boy or another gender, and being treated fairly

Gender includes the expectations society places on people because they are seen as girls or boys—for example, how they should dress, behave, work, express feelings or move around in public. These expectations can shape children's freedom and opportunities. Children may see different rules for daughters and sons at home, at school and in the community. Talking about gender helps children recognise unfairness and treat others with respect.

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| **Ages 2–5** | Let children explore different toys, colours, games and interests. Boys can cry and girls can climb, run and be adventurous. Avoid teasing a child for not matching a gender expectation. |
| **Ages 6–10** | Share household work fairly where possible. Discuss why sisters and brothers may be given different chores, clothes or freedoms. Encourage respect for everyone's abilities and interests. |
| **Ages 11–14** | Talk about body changes, appearance, clothing rules, safety, teasing, harassment and pressure to act "like a real boy" or "a good girl". Ask who benefits from a rule and who carries its burden. |
| **Ages 15–18** | Discuss unequal freedom, unpaid care work, harassment, consent, gender identity and how gender expectations affect education, work, friendships and relationships. Be willing to reflect on rules you grew up with and whether you want to pass them on. |

## Theme 4. Violence and staying safe: boundaries, consent and getting help

Children need to know that their body belongs to them, that they can speak up about unwanted touch, and that it is not their fault if someone harms or pressures them. Safety includes physical, emotional and online situations. Abuse can be committed by someone the child knows and trusts, as well as by a stranger.

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| **Ages 2–5** | Teach simple body boundaries and privacy. Do not force children to hug or kiss relatives. Explain that a trusted adult may help with washing or health care, but should explain what they are doing. Teach the child to tell you if a touch worries them. |
| **Ages 6–10** | Explain that unsafe behaviour can come from someone they know. Practise saying no, moving away and telling a trusted adult. Talk about secrets that make a child worried or afraid, and about asking for help. |
| **Ages 11–14** | Discuss bullying, teasing, pressure from friends, unwanted messages, sharing photos and meeting people online. Make clear that consent and boundaries matter for everyone. |
| **Ages 15–18** | Discuss consent in relationships: it must be freely given, without pressure or threats, and can be withdrawn. Talk about harassment, coercion, digital abuse, seeking help and supporting a friend who discloses harm. |

## Theme 5. Skills for health and well-being: feelings, decisions and communication

Growing up involves feelings, choices and pressure from others. Children need words for their feelings and opportunities to practise asking questions, making decisions, setting limits, solving problems and getting help. These skills are useful in friendships, school, family life and relationships.

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| **Ages 2–5** | Help children name feelings such as happy, sad, angry, scared or shy. Show them that feelings can be talked about and that they can ask for help. |
| **Ages 6–10** | Practise how to say no politely but firmly, ask an adult for help, resolve disagreements and speak up when something feels unfair. |
| **Ages 11–14** | Talk about embarrassment, changing emotions, peer pressure, rumours, body comparisons and online influence. Practise how to leave a situation or disagree with friends. |
| **Ages 15–18** | Discuss weighing choices, managing strong feelings, setting boundaries, communicating in relationships, coping with rejection and seeking health care or support when needed. |

## Theme 6. The human body and development: body parts, puberty and body image

Children need accurate information about their bodies. This includes correct names for body parts, how bodies differ, personal hygiene, puberty and the changes that come with growing up. Talking about bodies should not make children feel ashamed of their skin colour, size, disability, body shape or development.

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| **Ages 2–5** | Use correct names such as penis, vulva, breasts and bottom. Explain private parts and privacy in simple language. Curiosity and touching one's own body can occur; teach that this is private rather than shameful. |
| **Ages 6–10** | Talk about hygiene, privacy, body differences and early puberty before changes begin. Explain that touching one's own body is private and that children should respect other people's privacy too. |
| **Ages 11–14** | Discuss periods, erections, wet dreams, body hair, voice changes, sweat, pimples, growth spurts and changing feelings. Explain that timing differs and that myths about periods or semen are not health facts. |
| **Ages 15–18** | Talk about body image, social media comparisons, weight, skin, muscularity, appearance and pressure to look a certain way. Encourage care for the body rather than shame or constant comparison. |

## Theme 7. Sexuality and sexual behaviour: curiosity, attraction and choices

Sexuality includes feelings of attraction, closeness, curiosity and how people understand themselves. Young children do not need adult-level explanations, but they do need answers to their questions. As they grow, they need support to understand attraction, private behaviour, consent, boundaries and responsibility.

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| **Ages 2–5** | Answer simple questions about bodies and babies. If a child touches or rubs their own body, respond calmly and explain that touching private parts is something done in private, not as a reason for shame. |
| **Ages 6–10** | Answer questions about reproduction simply and honestly. Talk about crushes, body curiosity, privacy and respectful behaviour. Correct misinformation without scolding. |
| **Ages 11–14** | Discuss crushes, attraction, sexual jokes, words heard from friends, media messages and pressure to prove maturity. Explain that people develop at different rates and nobody should be pressured into sexual behaviour. |
| **Ages 15–18** | Discuss attraction, identity, relationships, sexual decision-making, consent, readiness, responsibility and your family's values. Keep communication open even when you feel worried or disagree with a choice. |

## Theme 8. Sexual and reproductive health: pregnancy, contraception and infections

Children gradually need to understand how pregnancy happens, how it can be prevented, and how people protect their sexual and reproductive health. The level of detail should grow with age. Accurate information helps young people avoid fear, myths and preventable harm.

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| **Ages 2–5** | Give a simple answer such as, "A baby grows in a special place inside the pregnant person's body." Answer follow-up questions without giving more detail than the child is asking for. |
| **Ages 6–10** | Explain, in simple terms, how a baby grows and is born. Correct myths such as pregnancy happening through a hug, a kiss or sitting near a boy. |
| **Ages 11–14** | Before puberty and adolescence progress, explain how pregnancy can happen through sexual intercourse, and introduce the idea that contraception can prevent pregnancy and condoms can reduce the risk of some infections. |
| **Ages 15–18** | Discuss contraception, condoms, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, testing, consent, and how to access reliable health care. Check current local law and health guidance rather than relying on rumours. |

## 4. How to bring your values into the conversation

Parents do not have to leave their values outside the conversation. Values are an important part of how children learn to make decisions. You may want your child to value commitment, privacy, responsibility, faith, family, respect or waiting until a particular stage of life before entering a relationship. Tell your child what you believe and why.

At the same time, separate three things:

- Health facts: for example, how periods work, how pregnancy happens, and how infections can spread. These should be accurate, even when the topic feels uncomfortable.
- Family values: for example, what your family believes about dating, marriage, privacy or responsibility. Explain these honestly and without threats or shame.
- Respect and safety: children and other people deserve dignity, accurate information, boundaries and protection from harm, even when their choices or lives differ from your expectations.

You can say, “In our family, we believe… because… Other families may think differently. I want you to understand our values, ask questions, and learn how to treat yourself and others responsibly.”

If your own views are changing, it is okay to say so. For example: “When I was growing up, I was taught that boys should not cry. I am beginning to think that everyone needs a way to express sadness, and I do not want you to feel you must hide your feelings.” Children can learn from seeing adults reflect, not only from hearing adults give rules.

## 5. What if I feel embarrassed, or other adults disagree?

You may never have said words such as penis or vulva aloud. You may worry that relatives will object, or that talking openly will make a child curious too early. Begin with the topic you can manage, practise the words, and take one step at a time. You do not need to deliver a speech.

In joint families, grandparents and other relatives may have different views. They may be trying to protect children, may believe that these topics should remain private, or may have grown up when nobody discussed them. Their discomfort does not automatically mean they do not care. You can respect them without giving up the child’s need for information and safety.

- Speak privately with relatives not in front of the child. Start with what you share: “We all want the child to be safe and grow up well.” Explain that you are not giving adult details to a young child; you are answering questions in simple, age-appropriate ways.
- Ask what worries them. The concern may be about timing, language, modesty, or fear that the child will experiment. Respond to the concern rather than labelling the person as backward or ignorant.
- Agree on a few shared messages if possible: bodies deserve respect, private parts are private, nobody should force or threaten a child, and children can tell a trusted adult if they are worried.
- If a child hears conflicting messages, explain that people were raised differently and may have different beliefs about what can be discussed. Do not make the child choose sides. You might say, “Aaji may feel this is a private topic because that is how she grew up. In our family, we can respect her and still ask questions. I will explain things in a way that is right for your age.”
- Avoid describing a relative as bad because they disagree. But also avoid telling a child that asking questions is shameful. Respect for elders and openness about health and safety can go together.

## 6. A quick guide: what topics matter most at each age?

This is a starting point, not a checklist that every parent must finish. Children develop at different rates. Choose what fits your child's questions, circumstances and stage, and return to topics more than once.

| Age group | Important topics to return to |
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| **Ages 2–5** | Correct names for body parts; normalizing curiosity about bodies; touching or exploring one's own body; public and private spaces; body ownership; simple boundaries and safe/unsafe situations; feelings; different families and roles. |
| **Ages 6–10** | Body privacy and hygiene; body differences and respect; continued body curiosity; gender roles and unequal rules; change is good and talking about puberty before it begins; periods, friendship and feelings; fairness between girls and boys; bullying and boundaries; trusted adults; basic online safety; simple reproduction facts. |
| **Ages 11–14** | Puberty with physical, emotional and social changes; body image and social expectations; gender roles and unequal rules; crushes and attraction; sexual jokes, words and conversations among peers; peer pressure; consent and boundaries; erections and wet dreams in simple terms; harassment and online safety; understanding reproductive systems and reproduction basics. |
| **Ages 15–18** | Body image and social media; identity, love and attraction; healthy and unhealthy relationships; consent and sexual decision-making; contraception and STI/HIV prevention; privacy and digital images; patriarchy and gender equality, harassment and safety; family values, rights, responsibility and access to reliable health information and services. |

### Remember

- Start with what your child needs to know now, and add detail as they grow.
- Your own comfort may take time to develop. Prepare, practise, and use reliable resources.
- Talk about gender and fairness at every age—not only when children become teenagers.
- Share your values and explain your reasons, while keeping health information accurate and children's dignity and safety central.
- The goal is not one perfect conversation. It is for your child to know: "I can ask, I can learn, and I can come to my parent or another trusted adult when I need help."