Prayas (Health Group)

GUIDE 2 OF 3

When Should You Start Talking to Your Child?

A practical guide for parents and caregivers

At a glance

- ✓ Start early, a little at a time, using simple words and everyday situations.
- ✓ Talk before a change happens: periods before the first period, wet dreams before they begin, and online safety before a child uses a phone independently.
- ✓ If your child never asks questions, create small opportunities to talk. Silence does not always mean there are no questions.
- ✓ If something surprises you, stay calm, listen first and then explain the boundary.
- ✓ If adults in the family disagree, speak privately, begin with what you share, and do not make the child choose sides.

In this guide

1 The short answer: start early, a little at a time

2 What can you talk about at different ages?

3 What if my child never asks questions?

4 What is usual curiosity, and when should I pay attention?

5 When adults in the family disagree about talking

6 Listen before correcting

1. The short answer: start early, a little at a time

You do not have to wait until your child reaches puberty, asks a question, or becomes a teenager. Start when your child is small, using simple words and everyday situations. As children grow, the conversations can grow with them.

Sexuality is not only about sex. It includes learning about the body, feelings, growing up, relationships, privacy, respect, safety, and how we treat other people. Children begin learning about these things from birth—from family life, the way adults speak and behave, what they see on television or phones, and what they hear from friends.

Families have different beliefs about modesty, privacy, relationships and what children should know at each age. These beliefs matter. You can respect your family's values while also giving your child clear, correct information that helps them understand their body, stay safe, and ask for help.

You do not need to know every answer. It is okay to say, "That is a good question. Let me think about it and we can talk again." What matters is that your child learns that questions can be asked without being shamed. However, remember if you have said, we can talk again, make sure you do talk again so that your child develops trust in you.

2. What can you talk about at different ages?

These ages are only a guide. Children develop at different rates, and some changes may begin earlier than expected. Notice what your child is asking, seeing, or experiencing. Give information before they are likely to need it, rather than waiting for a problem.

Age	What you may notice	What you can begin to say or do
Birth–3 years	Naming body parts; curiosity about bodies; touching their own genitals; following a caregiver into the bathroom; noticing differences between people.	Use correct, simple names for body parts. Explain privacy calmly: "We keep our private parts covered in shared spaces." Teach that their body belongs to them and that they can say no to unwanted touch. Answer simple questions honestly.
4–6 years	Questions about where babies come from; pretend play such as doctor-doctor or Ghar-Ghar; copying a kiss seen on screen; using words heard from others; touching their own body.	Explain simply how a baby grows and is born. If you have talked about body parts and their names then it becomes easier to talk about it. Say that curiosity is normal, but private parts are private. Explain that nobody should ask them to keep a touch involving private parts secret. Identify trusted adults they can tell.

Age	What you may notice	What you can begin to say or do
7–12 years	More privacy or shyness; jokes about bodies; crushes; questions from friends or the internet; puberty beginning for some children around 8 or 9 years.	Talk before periods, wet dreams, body hair, erections and other changes begin. Explain masturbation in a calm, age-appropriate way as something some people do privately. Discuss respect, consent, bullying, online safety, and what to do if content or a message makes them uncomfortable.
13 years and older	Romantic or sexual attraction; strong feelings; desire for privacy and independence; pressure from friends or partners; questions about identity and relationships.	Talk about healthy relationships, consent, pressure, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, digital images and online risks. Share your family values and explain your reasons, while making it possible for your teenager to ask questions or disagree without losing your support.

Keep these points in mind

- Talk before a change or situation happens
- You do not have to explain everything at once. A few calm sentences and several conversations are often more useful than one long lecture.
- Age-appropriate means both what a child can understand now and what they need to know for what may happen next.
- If you are starting when your child is older, it is not too late. You can say, “I realise we have not spoken about this much. I would like us to be able to talk about it now.”

3. What if my child never asks questions?

A child who does not ask may still be curious. They may feel shy, may have learned that these topics are “bad” or embarrassing, may not know how to begin, or may be looking for answers from friends, cousins, television or the internet. As children get older, they may also want more privacy.

Rather than waiting for questions, create small opportunities to talk:

- Use everyday moments: a pregnancy, a sanitary-pad advertisement, a scene in a film, something heard at school, or a question raised by a younger child.
- Try asking, “What do children your age hear about this?” or “Did anything you saw or heard confuse you?”
- Talk while walking, travelling, cooking or doing another activity together. Some children find it easier when they do not have to sit face-to-face.
- Keep it brief. If your child loses interest, pause and return to it another time.

- Respond calmly to the first question. Avoid scolding or asking angrily, “Who taught you this?” Thank them for asking and answer honestly in words they can understand.
- Do not force a conversation. You can say, “That is okay. If you ever want to ask, I am here.”

If a child suddenly becomes very withdrawn, seems frightened of a particular person or place, or tells you something worrying, gently listen and follow up. Do not dismiss a sudden change as ordinary shyness.

4. What is usual curiosity, and when should I pay attention?

Some children are curious about bodies and may explore or play pretend games with other children. This does not automatically mean that something is wrong. Stay calm, set clear boundaries, and consider the whole situation.

Curiosity is more likely to be ordinary when the children are of a similar age and stage, nobody is pressured or distressed, the behaviour is occasional, and it stops when an adult calmly explains the boundary.

Pay closer attention if there is force, threats, coercion, distress, a major difference in age or ability, repeated behaviour that does not stop after guidance, or behaviour that seems far beyond the child’s stage. If you are worried, seek advice from a knowledgeable and experienced person.

If you find children in a situation that surprises you, avoid shouting, slapping or shaming them. Calmly stop the activity, make sure everyone is safe, and speak with each child separately. Use open questions such as, “Can you tell me what was happening?” Avoid leading questions or repeatedly questioning a child. If you suspect abuse, seek professional child-protection guidance.

Teach boundaries clearly: “It is okay to be curious. Private parts are private. No one should pressure you to touch or show private parts, and you can always tell me if something happens.”

5. When adults in the family disagree about talking

In many families, children are cared for by parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and other relatives. This can be a great source of love and support. It can also mean that adults have different views about when and how to talk about bodies, puberty, relationships and sexuality.

Some adults may feel that children should learn these things only after marriage, that talking about them will make children curious too early, or that such matters should remain private. Others may worry that speaking openly will weaken respect for elders or family traditions. Some grew up without anyone explaining these things to them and may feel uncomfortable or criticised when a younger parent does it differently. These concerns may come from care, experience, fear or the social rules they grew up with—not necessarily from a lack of love for the child.

At the same time, children still need accurate information, safe boundaries and a trusted adult they can approach. Respecting elders does not mean that parents must remain silent about a child’s health or safety.

What parents can do

1. Speak privately with the other adult, rather than arguing in front of the child. Begin with shared intentions: “We both want the child to be safe, healthy and able to make good decisions.”

2. Explain what you mean by sexuality education. It does not mean giving a young child adult details. It means teaching the correct names for body parts, privacy, boundaries, respect, puberty and safety in ways the child can understand.
3. Listen to the concern before responding. Ask, “What worries you about talking about this?” You may discover that the concern is about timing, the words used, privacy, or fear that the child will experiment.
4. Explain your reason without insulting their upbringing: “We were not told these things when we were young, but children hear and see a lot today. I want our child to be able to come to us rather than feel afraid or depend only on friends or the internet.”
5. If the disagreement continues, avoid turning it into a contest over who is the better parent or grandparent. Keep important conversations calm, private and age-appropriate, and make sure the child has access to a trusted adult who will listen.

What can I say to my child if they hear different messages?

Children may hear one adult say, “You should not ask such questions,” while another says it is okay to ask. Depending on the child’s age, explain that people learn different things about these topics because of how they were brought up, what their families believe, and what they were taught was acceptable to discuss.

You might say:

> *“Ajoba and Aaji grew up at a time when people often did not talk openly about bodies and growing up. They may feel that these things should stay private, or they may worry that talking about them will make children grow up too fast. That is what they have learned and may be trying to protect you. Different people can feel differently about this. In our family, we can respect them and still ask questions. I will explain things in a way that is right for your age, and you can always come to me if you are confused or worried.”*

Use words that sound natural in your family and are suitable for your child’s age. For a younger child, keep it to one or two sentences. An older child may be ready to discuss how culture, generation, privacy and fear shape people’s views.

Avoid saying that grandparents are ignorant, backward or wrong about everything. That can make a child feel they must choose between people they love. Equally, avoid telling the child that asking questions is shameful or that an adult’s discomfort means the topic is wrong. You can respect a person without agreeing with every belief they hold.

6. Listen before correcting

Parents set limits because they want their children to learn, behave responsibly and stay safe. But if every unexpected question or mistake is met with anger, a child may hide things or stop asking for help.

Listening first does not mean agreeing with everything or allowing every behaviour. It means trying to understand what happened and then explaining the boundary or value clearly. You can say, “I am glad you told me. Let us talk about what happened and what we can do next.”

Children may ask questions that surprise or embarrass us. Take a breath. If you do not know the answer, say so and find reliable information together. If you react sharply, you can return later and repair the conversation: “I was surprised and reacted badly. You did the right thing by asking me.”

We cannot prevent every difficulty our children may face. But we can help them know that if something confuses them, worries them or goes wrong, they can approach us and expect to be heard.

Remember

- Start early, with simple words.
- Talk before children need the information, not only after something happens.
- Respect family and cultural differences, while keeping children’s health, dignity and safety central.
- You do not have to say everything perfectly. Keep the conversation open and return to it as your child grows.