Prayas (Health Group)

GUIDE 1 OF 3

Why Talk to Your Children About Sexuality?

A guide for parents and caregivers

At a glance

- ✓ Sexuality is much more than sex. It includes our bodies, feelings, relationships, gender and health.
- ✓ Children begin learning about these things from an early age, and what they need to know changes as they grow.
- ✓ Warnings and family rules matter, but children also need to understand why, and what to do when they need help.
- ✓ Starting early does not mean telling children everything at once. It means helping them learn what they need, when they need it.
- ✓ You do not need to have all the answers. Small, everyday conversations are a good start.

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As parents, we want our children to grow up happy, healthy, confident and responsible. We want them to know how to look after themselves, respect others, make thoughtful decisions and feel comfortable coming to us when something is troubling them.

How do we help our children develop these qualities? Many of the answers begin with the conversations we have with them as they grow up.

1. What do we want our children to learn?

We want our children to:

- Know their bodies, respect them and look after their health.
- Understand the changes they experience as they grow up.
- Say “no” when something feels wrong, and respect other people’s “no”.
- Tell us or another trusted adult when something is troubling them, without fear of being blamed or judged.
- Treat girls, boys and everyone with respect and fairness.
- Understand their feelings, friendships and relationships.
- Make thoughtful decisions, including when they face pressure from others or are using the internet.

These are some of the things children learn through conversations about their bodies, feelings, relationships, safety and growing up. These conversations are an important part of sexuality education.

2. What is sexuality? It is much more than sex

Sexuality is a part of being human throughout our lives. It includes our bodies, feelings, relationships, understanding of gender, and sexual and reproductive health. It is not just about sex.

Children begin learning about these things from an early age. What they need to know changes as they grow up. A young child may need help learning the names of body parts, understanding privacy and expressing feelings. An older child may have questions about puberty, attraction, relationships or reproduction.

Consider some questions or situations parents may encounter:

- A 4-year-old asks, “What is this called?” while bathing.
- A 9-year-old asks why her older sister is not going to the temple during her period.
- A 12-year-old boy is teased for crying “like a girl”.
- A 15-year-old says, “I like someone in my class.”

These situations involve the body, growing up, gender, feelings or relationships. They are all part of sexuality education.

Children do not need to learn everything at once. They need accurate information in simple language, at the right time as they grow and develop. Starting with everyday conversations helps prepare them for the questions and changes that come later.

3. From warnings to conversations that build confidence

Parents often warn children because they want to protect them. Warnings, boundaries and family rules can be important. But children also need to understand why rules matter, how to recognise difficult situations and what they can do when they need help.

Here are some examples of how the same topic can be approached in different ways.

Situation	A warning based mainly on fear	A conversation that builds confidence
Periods	"Hide the pad. Don't tell anyone. Stay away from the kitchen."	"Periods are a normal part of how many bodies work. Let's talk about how to manage them. If you have pain or worries, you can tell me."
Phones and friendships	"If I catch you talking to a boy, your phone and studies will stop."	"Someone may pressure you or ask for photos. You can say no, protect your privacy and come to me if anything worries you. I'll listen and help."
Safety from harm	"Stay away from strangers. Never go out alone."	"Your body and personal boundaries matter. If anyone, including someone you know, does something that makes you uncomfortable or asks you to keep an unsafe secret, tell me or another trusted adult. You deserve to be heard and helped."
Relationships	"You are too young for all this. Concentrate on your studies."	"It's possible to like someone as you grow up. Let's talk about what respect looks like, how to recognise pressure and how to make choices that feel right for you."

The key difference

Warnings tell children what not to do. Conversations can help them understand why, recognise difficult situations and know what to do when something happens.

Children will not always have us beside them. They need to know how to make decisions, recognise pressure, set boundaries and ask for help. Our role is not just to protect them, but also to help them develop these skills as they grow.

This does not mean doing away with family rules or values. We can explain what we believe, why we believe it, and how those values guide our decisions. We can also listen to our children's questions and help them think through situations they may face.

4. Three common worries

"Isn't it too early?"

It depends on what we are talking about. Young children can learn the names of body parts, privacy, personal boundaries and how to seek help. As they grow, conversations can include puberty, relationships, reproduction and other topics suited to their age and understanding. Starting early does not mean telling children everything at once. It means helping them learn what they need, when they need it. Also, a simple rule to remember- If the child is old enough to ask a question, the child is old enough to get an answer. The only difference would be providing the answer as per the age and understanding of the child.

"Won't talking about sexuality encourage them to experiment?"

Good-quality, age-appropriate sexuality education does not encourage children to start sexual activity earlier. Research suggests it can help young people make informed decisions and practise safer behaviours. Keeping children uninformed does not prevent them from encountering questions or information about sexuality. They may instead turn to friends or online sources that are not always reliable.

"Isn't this the school's job?"

Parents are the primary sexuality educators for their children. Intentionally or unintentionally, children learn a lot about sexuality from parents. Schools have an important role in providing accurate information and helping children develop the knowledge and skills they need as they grow up. Parents and caregivers have an equally important role: they can connect this learning to everyday life, share family values and help children work through questions and concerns. Children benefit when the adults around them work together and when they know whom they can approach for help.

You don't have to have all the answers

You do not need to have all the answers or know exactly what to say. You can start with your child's questions, listen without judgement and answer honestly in words they can understand. Small, everyday conversations can make it easier to talk about more difficult things as your child grows up.

Next guide: When to start talking to your child