Talking about sex with my child at age 6? Isn't he/she a little young?

Absolutely not! In fact, most parents don't start the conversation soon enough. Waiting until your child is a teenager may be too late – a 2010 study found that over 40% of kids had had sexual intercourse before their parents had even talked to them about STIs, sex, HIV, or contraception. Plus, they may be hearing about sex from other sources – their friends at school, TV, popular songs, and the Internet. These are all common places that kids as young as grade school are hearing about sex, and chances are good that they're getting inaccurate or incomplete information.

Won't talking with my grade school–aged child about sex just make him or her want to try it?

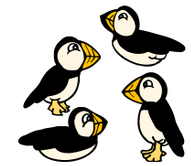
Actually, studies have shown that children who discuss sex with their parents before reaching puberty are more likely to be older the first time they have it. And anyway, kids this age aren't interested in sex because they want to try it. They're very curious about bodies (theirs and others'), and they're starting to have questions about sexuality – why girls and boys act and dress differently, why people kiss each other on the mouth, why some kids have a mom and a dad, and others have two moms or two dads. Most importantly, kids are curious about sex because they can tell that it's a taboo or secret topic. By age 6, children should know (and most do) that they're not supposed to touch their "private parts" in public, or show those parts to other kids. Talking to your child about sex at this age will reinforce the concept of personal privacy, while teaching them not to be ashamed or guilty about masturbation or self-exploration.

My parents never talked to *me* about sex, so I'm not sure I'm the one to do it. Won't my child get this education in school?

Depending on where you live and what type of school your child attends, he or she will probably get some sex education in high school. However, a 2008 study showed that one in four high school students learned about abstinence only, with no instruction on birth control. The earliest your child might get some sex education in school is usually 5th grade, and that will mostly be about puberty. That means that up until about age 10, *you* are the most important source of accurate information for your child! If you want to brush up on your facts before talking to your child, check out the Resources section of this pamphlet.

Is my 6-year-old even capable of understanding a discussion about sex? I mean, it's pretty complicated!

It definitely is, and it is perfectly all right (and in fact better) to give simple but accurate information or answers to your child's particular questions. Starting at around age 6-7 (or around first grade) most kids are starting to think logically about facts and events, but they still have trouble understanding abstract ideas or hypothetical situations. They're starting to make generalizations about the things they observe in their environment. For example, your child might notice that he and his brother have penises, but his sister has a vagina, and so he concludes that all boys have penises and all girls have vaginas. Or he might notice that his mother and his friend's mother have been pregnant, but he has never seen any fathers be pregnant; therefore, he concludes that women can be pregnant and men cannot. It's important to keep in mind that his ability to categorize is still very basic. This is not the time, for example, to explain in detail why some women aren't able to get pregnant. It is, however, an excellent time to encourage him to make connections between the physical act of sex and the broader idea of sexuality. The best way to do this is by taking advantage of "teachable moments," which are described next.



I believe that talking about sex is important, but when is the best time to do it? Should I just start the conversation at the dinner table?

It can feel forced or awkward to try and start a conversation (about anything) with your child when he or she is not in the mood. The **best** time to start talking about sex is when your child asks you a question about it (see list of common questions below). Other good opportunities are "teachable moments." These can include:

- Bath or shower time (a great time to talk about the basics of male and female anatomy)
- Birth of a child in the family or friend's family (you can start talking about the basics of conception, development, and birth).
- Seeing mating animals at the zoo (you may laugh, but many parents have reported that this situation arose and it turned out to be a great way to talk about reproduction!)
- If you catch your child playing "doctor" with a friend or sibling. Don't get angry with him or her if this happens – use it as a reminder that clothes stay on when you play with friends, and then offer to answer any questions he or she has about body parts or functions.
- For older children (age 7-8), during television viewing, especially if you are watching the news and there is a story about AIDS, rape, or homosexuality, for example.

What are some questions I might hear from my child, and how can I best answer them?

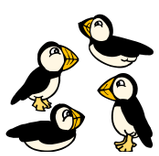
There are a few general principles to follow when your child asks questions about sex:

- Don't laugh at or scold him/her for any question he/she asks, no matter how silly it may seem to you. He/she shouldn't be made to feel ashamed for being curious. Thank him/her for asking the question, and if he/she has used an inappropriate word, gently correct it and teach him/her the right term.
- Calmly ask your child why he/she is asking you that particular question, as well as what he/she already knows. That way you can get an understanding of what your child has been hearing and what he/she is curious about.
- Answer as simply and thoroughly as you can. If you don't know an answer to the question, say that! Say something like "That's a great question, and I don't know the answer right now, but I'll find out and get back to you." Then make sure to follow through on your promise to do so!

Below is a list of common questions that might come from your 6-8 year old. This list is by no means a complete one – your child will almost certainly come up with his or her own creative and thoughtful questions.

- **"How are the bodies of boys and girls different?"** *Give basic information about body parts and talk about the changes their bodies go through during puberty.*
- **"How old do girls have to be before they can have a baby?"** *Explain that a girl's body is capable of having a baby once she starts getting her period, but just because the body is ready doesn't mean the girl is ready or wants to have a baby.*
- **"Do you have to get married to have a baby?"** *This is a good question or topic to introduce your values as they relate to marriage, pre-marital sex, religion, etc.*

- **"Why do boys get erections?"**
- **"What is a period?"**
- **"How do people have sex?"**
- **"Do you and Mom have sex?"** *Be truthful and positive, but don't feel the need to divulge too many details about your sex life. Explain that sex is a very special act between two people who love each other, and that it is a private thing that only they share.*
- **"What are condoms?"** *Explain that if two people want to have sex without having a baby, they need to use condoms or other kinds of protection.*
- **"Why do some men like other men?"** *Children have differing levels of awareness of same-sex relationships, depending on their environments. In some cases, they may also pick up on an a negative attitude towards homosexuality, so this is a great opportunity to explain that it's normal for men to like women or other men. In addition, a child of this age may confuse a romantic relationship between two people of the same gender with having a close friend of the same gender. Explain to your child that liking and loving someone does not depend on their gender and is different from liking someone sexually.*
- **"Why did you and Dad fall in love?"** *Around 8 years old, children will start to become more interested in the differences between friendly and romantic relationships. This is a great time to share stories of how you and your spouse met, what the pregnancy was like, how you decided on your child's name, etc.*



Okay, fine! I feel ready to start the sex conversation. What are some points that I should keep in mind?

- Talking about sex is an ongoing conversation. Be prepared to answer many questions that increase in complexity as your child ages.
- Always be open and engaging. Your child should never feel like he or she is doing something wrong by wanting answers.
- Use anatomic terms for body parts. Using cutesy names may give your child the impression that there is something offensive about the real terms.
- Your child is observant. Remember that any attitudes you (and your partner, family, and/or friends) display around him or her is what he or she will adopt, too.
- Enjoy yourself! This is a great way to bond with your child and to learn more about him or her.

My child isn't really the sit-still-and-listen type. Do you have any ideas for activities we can do together to learn about this stuff in a fun way?

- Draw pictures. Familiarize yourself with male and female anatomy (many of the books listed in the next section can help!) and practice drawing and coloring them together.
- Trace your child's body on easel paper or poster board, and have him/her add his/her features and internal structures. This is also a great way to point out the changes his/her body will go through during puberty (where he/she will get hair, how she will develop breasts, how his voice will deepen, etc.)
- Write a storybook, compose a song, or make a video telling the story of his or her birth up until now. The autobiography doesn't necessarily have to focus on sexuality – it can be a way for your child to express his/her creativity and uniqueness as well as an amazing keepsake for years to come.

I love this pamphlet, but it's so short! Where do I go for more resources for my kids and myself?

Books for kids ages 6-8:

- *Did the Sun Shine Before You Were Born?* (Schoen and Schoen)
- *Belly Buttons are Navels* (Schoen)
- *It's Not the Stork! A Book About Girls, Boys, Babies, Bodies, Families, and Friends* (Harris and Emberley)
- *It's So Amazing! A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth Babies and Families* (Harris and Emberley)
- *What's the Big Secret? Talking About Sex With Girls and Boys* (Brown and Brown)

Books for parents:

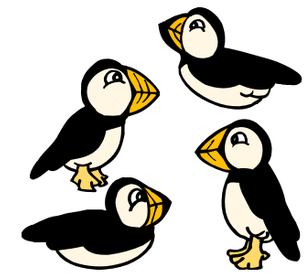
- *The Talk: What Your Kids Need to Hear from You About Sex* (Maxwell)
- *Everything You Never Wanted Your Kids to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid They'd Ask): The Secrets to Surviving Your Child's Sexual Development from Birth to the Teens* (Richardson and Schuster)

Videos:

- "The True Story of How Babies Are Made" http://sexsmartfilms.com/free-videos/the-true-story-of-how-babies-are-made. *SexSmart Films is a fantastic resource. Some films are free, and others are just 99¢ to stream. Highly recommended for both kids and parents!*

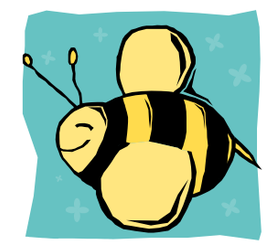
Websites:

- There's No Place Like Home…for Sex Education! *Comprehensive, organized by age or grade level*. http://noplacelikehome.org.
- "How to Talk with Your Children About Sex." *Just one of many great resources from Planned Parenthood.* http://www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/how-talk-your-child-about-sex-4422.htm
- Talk With Your Kids http://talkwithyourkids.org



Talking to Your Child About Sex

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers of Children Ages 6 – 8



Final Project in AMSA's Sexual Health Scholars Program
Arija Weddle
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