

# Guidelines and Tools for Parents

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This section offers eight guidelines as well as practical suggestions for parents/caregivers in their role as the primary sexuality educators of their children.

*Show love and demonstrate affection.* Loving, caring touch nurtures children's self-esteem and positive feelings toward others. When you demonstrate warmth, affection, and support for children and/or other adults, you nurture the child, communicate care, and show how to behave in interpersonal relationships. Remember to touch and hug your children and show love, regardless of their age. But be sensitive to the kind of touch that your children enjoy at each age level. Refusing to adjust to children's changing tastes can deeply offend them.

*Use accurate, age-appropriate language.* When talking with children, remember to use simple, concrete words that they can understand. When children are taught the correct words for bodily functions and sexual parts, they learn that they have a right to know and ask questions and that adults are willing to discuss these topics with them. If you are uncomfortable using proper terminology for parts of the body, such as penis, scrotum, vulva, vagina, uterus, and anus, practice saying these words in front of a mirror. When children know the correct words for parts of the body, the topic is no longer hidden but one they can share with adults.

In her book *When Sex Is the Subject*, nationally renowned sexuality educator Pamela Wilson stresses that the words we use to educate children about sexuality are not really as important as the "music" of our message:

A colleague of mine in Washington, D.C., social worker and sexuality trainer Wayne Pawlowski, compares educating children about sexuality with attending a Broadway musical. When you go to a musical and really like it, you often leave the show humming the melody of a favorite song. People rarely sing the lyrics because they can't remember them. The same can be true in sex education. When we talk with children about sexuality, they may not remember many of our actual words, but they will remember the tone of the conversation and the feelings engendered during the discussion.

In other words, it is not simply *what* we say but *how* we say it that provides children with healthy messages about sexuality. If we convey positive attitudes, children will remember that we will always accept their questions. They will remember hearing that their emotions and concerns are normal. They will remember hearing the positive messages about the human body and the need for caring touch among all human beings. Children will adopt, with increasing comfort, the language their parents/caregivers and teachers use when they discuss sexuality issues with them in an open and unembarrassed manner. More and more clearly, they will hear and appreciate the music we play

**Create an antibiais environment in your home.** As Pamela Wilson advises in *When Sex Is the Subject*, “Show that you value diversity in the friends and images of people in books, toys, and materials that you bring into your home.” Give messages through your words and actions that differences in human beings—race and ethnicity, sex and gender, age, ability—are positive and are topics to talk about. Establish a family ground rule that it is unacceptable to use sexist language; to stereotype genders, ages, races, and other differences; or to reject anyone based on appearance. All children need to learn that their bodies are beautiful.

**Be an “askable” parent.** When adults are *askable*, they convey an attitude of openness to their children and set the stage for a lifelong process of questioning and learning. The American Social Health Association (ASHA) defines the ABCs of sexuality communication as “Be Askable! Build Bridges! Continue to Learn!” According to the Association, an askable parent:

- shows respect, value, and love for children
- wants communication but doesn’t expect to have all the answers
- knows the most important part of communicating is listening

The ASHA pamphlet *Be an Askable Parent* (see the Resources section) describes some techniques that have helped parents/caregivers build bridges of communication with their children.

**Focus on your goals.** Even if you are uncomfortable talking about sexuality, the purpose of these conversations with your child is usually to answer questions, eliminate fears, and build the child’s self-confidence.

**Plan how to respond to questions.** Parents/caregivers who are uncomfortable talking about sexuality may find it helpful to plan what they will say and how they might answer their child’s questions. When your child asks a question or does something that triggers a teachable moment, you may find this three-step response format useful:

1. Make sure you know what your child is asking. (Ask, “Do you mean . . . ?” or “Do you want to know about . . . ?”)
2. Discover why the child is asking. Is your child trying to:
  - check a fact?
  - make sure they are normal?

- test your knowledge?
- explore their values?
- satisfy curiosity?

After you've decided what to say, keep it short and simple. This *Parent Guide* includes detailed examples of teachable moments and possible responses to them.

- *Respond immediately to your child's need to know.* Even if your child asks a question at a difficult time, it is better to answer right away, if only briefly. You can always resume the discussion later when you have collected your thoughts or when you have more privacy.
- *Take the initiative, if necessary.* If your child isn't asking questions by age 6, you should find moments to begin talking about sexuality issues. The earlier you begin communicating with your child, the easier it will be for both of you.
- *Continue to learn* by anticipating your child's questions and by learning the stages of sexual development.

*Provide opportunities for children to learn through observation and to discover things for themselves,* suggests Wilson in *When Sex Is the Subject*. Some examples include visiting a pregnant woman, visiting people who work in nontraditional gender roles, and interacting with families from diverse backgrounds. Encourage children to ask questions. Anatomically complete dolls, playhouses, and dress-up clothing also provide opportunities for discovery. Collect a variety of sexuality education books of different developmental levels for your home. Books with illustrations on many sexuality topics provide a catalyst for discussion and learning. Consult the Resources section of this guide for a short list of organizations and resources about sexuality and sexual health. There are many excellent books for professionals, parents, and children about sex and sexuality. One engaging way to start a family focus on sexuality education is to view the videos from Amaze.org with your children and continue the conversation it begins. (See the Resources section for information.)

*Use teachable moments.* A teachable moment is a situation and/or question that can be used as an opportunity for teaching. These moments can happen everywhere and any time you answer children's questions, respond to their behavior, or reinforce their body rights and responsibilities. Use teachable moments to communicate what is or is not appropriate behavior, to help children understand the consequences of their behavior, to encourage them to express how they feel, and to speak up for themselves. Many questions provide opportunities to teach them that their bodies belong to them and that they have the right to decide who can touch their bodies.

When responding to a child's question, the following guidelines may be helpful:

- Determine what the child is really asking, and find out what the child already knows, thinks, and feels.
- Decide what message you want to give.
- Respond simply and briefly with age-appropriate language, and encourage the child to respond to you.

When responding to a child's behavior, you may want to follow similar guidelines:

- Name the behavior as you see or hear it.
- Determine the meaning of the behavior to the child.
- Decide what message(s) you want to give.
- Respond with simple, direct messages using age-appropriate language, and encourage the child to respond to you.

Teachable moments allow you to emphasize body rights and responsibilities. Almost every day, parents/caregivers, teachers, and religious educators can use common situations in the home, neighborhood, school, congregation, and community to provide messages about consent and recognizing abuse. You may want to use the following suggestions adapted from Lory Freeman's book, *It's MY Body: A Book to Teach Young Children How to Resist Uncomfortable Touch* (see the Resources section):

- Your body is something very special that belongs only to you.
- You have the right to decide with whom to share your body
- Say *no* to unwanted touching, and tell others right away
- Each and every person's body is special and belongs only to them.

## CONCLUSION

This program is now in your hands. If this guide helps you talk with your children about sexuality, moves you to deeper ethical convictions, and assists you in being a caring and responsible parent, it will have accomplished its purpose. Talk about it. Share your experiences with others. Carry on!