

Ah, “the talk.” As uncomfortable as it can be, talking to your adolescent about sexuality is absolutely necessary. Here’s how to start the conversation, and keep it going.



Talk the Talk *Before* They Walk the Walk

By Keith Ferrell

Adolescence can be tough enough to get through without questions of sex, sexuality, and sexual identity. But adolescents are humans, too — no matter how alien they may seem to their parents at times. Openly addressing the all-too-human questions of sexual development, sexual desire, and the nature of the adolescent's developing sexual identity are critical. Sharing factual information with and giving good moral guidance to your teenager is a vitally important part of helping your teen understand herself or himself. It can help your child avoid devastating, and possibly life-threatening, errors in judgment.

"Above all, it is critical that parents be truthful, honest, and available to their children," says Charles R. Wibbelsman, M.D., FAAP, Chief of Adolescent Medicine at Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco and a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Adolescence.

"Parents often have their own agenda — don't do this and don't do that. But they need to take a step back and leave the judgments aside for this discussion," says Warren Seigel, M.D., FAAP, Chairman of the Pediatrics Department and Director of Adolescent Medicine at Coney Island Hospital, Brooklyn, N.Y. "The most appropriate and important thing for a parent and a child or adolescent in dealing with questions about sexuality and sexual health is an open channel of communication."

The Messages They Get

In today's hyper-sexualized culture of Internet sites, mass media entertainers, and 24/7 programming, the traditional "birds and bees" lecture (or pamphlet handed to the child to read on her or his own) on reproductive basics is completely inadequate. Carefully preparing children for the normal changes in their bodies as well as the endless assault of peer pressure, media glorification of irresponsible sexuality, and advertising come-ons is the only way to create a sense of security for parents and children alike.

"There are a lot of things in the media that are not appropriate for a particular age," says Dr. Wibbelsman, who is co-author of *The Teenage Body Book* and *Growing and Changing*. "We don't put children on the street and wish them luck before sending

them out on their own. We hold their hands. We educate them about the risks. And we trust them with increasing responsibility only as they're old enough and show they're ready to handle it."

"The media particularly and everything around us talks about sex," adds Dr. Seigel. "It's hard to avoid it."

The only foolproof approach to sexual safety, of course, is to say "no" and defer sexual activity until later in life. The good news is that as many as half of all adolescents do just that. But that leaves the other half at risk — many of them engaging in unprotected sex, exposing themselves to potentially grave disease and unwanted pregnancy.

"The most important thing to teach your child is responsibility," Dr. Seigel says. "Discuss how to make decisions and understand what the consequences of decisions will be. You can start by discussing decisions and consequences that don't involve sex, and then move the conversation toward sexuality. After all, there are consequences to having sex or not having sex, and every child is going to get a lot of misinformation along the way from their peers and the media."

The pressures upon children — from peers and also the media as mentioned above — may actually offer one of the most effective pathways to opening what must be an ongoing dialogue about sex and sexuality, not a single talk or lecture. What to do, then? It's good to turn these encounters with the media into teachable moments.

"Seeing something in the media that is obviously sexually charged can be a springboard for conversation between adolescent and parent," says Dr. Wibbelsman. "Is the ad bad or good? What's the ad trying to say? Use this moment as an opportunity to teach and encourage, not to pronounce a harsh, dismissive judgment. By engaging the child and building his self-esteem and her confidence in her ability to make judgments, you're showing him that you respect what he's learning and how she's growing in her decision-making."

After all, however adult their appearance, behavior, and attitudes may appear, adolescents remain closer to childhood than adulthood, and children need ongoing parental guidance to prepare for adulthood. "I know it's a lot of work, but parents need to monitor what their children see and be there, available to

them, to provide some context,” says Dr. Wibbelsman. “Find out what’s in the movie, what’s in the program, what’s on that Internet site before you let your child see or hear. And experience with him or her together, so you can discuss it and use it to build trust between you.”

Starting the Discussion

So when is the right time to start talking about sex with your child? It’s a good idea to start laying the groundwork for these conversations long before the onset of puberty. The more frequently and frankly sexual matters are discussed, the easier and even more open such discussions are likely to be as you both grow comfortable with talking about it. “Let’s face it, we’re all embarrassed to talk about sex with each other,” Dr. Seigel says. “The easiest way to start is to be real with your adolescent: ‘This is really hard for me to talk about, and it was hard for me to talk about with my dad when I was your age.’ But it’s important to talk about, and we have to talk about embarrassing things sometimes.”

Keep reminding your child that you are in her corner every step of the way. “Never let them forget that your love is unconditional,” Dr. Seigel says. “Tell them, ‘I am here with you, and I love you and I will be here with you no matter what through all of this.’ Yes, it’s much easier said than done, but no less important.”

So what should you talk about? Perhaps start with how sexuality is portrayed in the media and, far more importantly, how it “works” in real life — the potentially bad consequences and catastrophes than can be a result of sexual activity, as well as the pleasure and positive results of responsible sexuality (remember: the job here is to be honest.) “You see a character in a TV show who’s made a decision with regard to sex,” Dr. Seigel says. “Start the discussion there, but don’t make it your soapbox. If you harshly criticize what you’re both seeing, your child will assume there’s no discussion to be had, and there goes your channel of communication.”

By approaching the topic carefully and conversationally, you and your child are much more likely to sort through the complexities together.

Keeping the Channels Open

As your child matures — physically, mentally, and emotionally — opportunities will emerge for making regular discussions about sexuality part of your continuing conversation. Obviously, changes in your child’s body as puberty begins are crucial markers for such conversations.

One area that should receive particular attention is “urban myths” — bits of false information that “everyone” knows, passed along from adolescent to adolescent (and even from generation to generation: Don’t be surprised to find that your child has heard some of the same myths and misinformation that circulated during your adolescence). Make clear, for instance, that oral sex is not without risks, that unprotected intercourse without ejaculation is not effective birth control, and so on. “It’s very important to get the facts straight from the start, and share those facts with your child,” says Dr. Wibbelsman. “That builds trust, and that trust is critical to guiding your adolescent through these challenging times.”

In particular, be specific and accurate about the risks or pregnancy, the effectiveness (and limitations) of different types of birth control, and the variety of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and their effects. (See

Helpful Resources

For more information about talking to your child about human sexuality, visit these Web-based resources:

- **The American Academy of Pediatrics:** aap.org/healthtopics/sexuality.cfm
- **The Mayo Clinic’s Teen Health section:** www.mayoclinic.com/health/sex-education/CC00032
- **The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy:** www.teenpregnancy.org
- **Nemours Foundation:**
 - **Talking about puberty** (kidshealth.org/parent/growth/growing/talk_about_puberty.html);
 - **Abstinence** (kidshealth.org/teen/sexual_health/contraception/abstinence.html)

“Helpful Resources” at the top of this page for reliable resources of information on these subjects.)

Countering the Pressure

One key area to emphasize is that no one has the right to pressure your daughter or son to have sex. Peer pressure — and the media pressure that often stimulates it — can be addressed by empowering your children with your belief in their ability to withstand such pressure, a sense of values that are more important than immediate gratification, and their absolute freedom to bring any concerns to you.

It is wholly natural for adolescents to have questions about sex and sexual identity. While attitudes toward gay and lesbian identity (among other issues) remain tangled and complex, the crucial thing to bear in mind is that all of us have such questions at one time or another. “Parents need to be open about that and understand the entire spectrum of sexuality and sexual orientation, and not try to funnel them into a particular niche or area,” says Dr. Wibbelsman. “Accept the adolescent’s questions as part of growing up, because that’s exactly what it is. But at the same time, let the adolescent know what your views and values are. Know the difference between facts and your opinion, and be clear about both.”

But how to do it in a way that helps keep the channels open? It’s a four-letter word, actually. “The key is to let adolescents know that you love them no matter who they become,” Dr. Seigel says. “They may turn out tall, short, heavy, thin, healthy, or sickly — but you’ll love them no matter what, no matter what decisions they make. That is much easier said than done for many parents, but that’s key to raising a healthy adolescent.”

And don’t hesitate to discuss values, morals, and ethics with regard to sex — without lecturing, but with guidance. By providing your child with a solid framework of information and values, you’ve taken a large step toward making sure that when he or she becomes sexually active it will be with the knowledge, preparation, and maturity that will mark the transition to sexual activity as an informed choice, not a risky accident. ●