

Won't talking about sex make my child want to experiment?

Talking to children and young people about sex does not encourage sexual experimentation. In fact, research indicates teenagers who receive a comprehensive sexuality education have a lower risk of unintended pregnancy and are less likely to have sex at an early age.

Avoiding the subject won't stop young people having sex, but it may result in them relying on inaccurate information, putting them at risk of unwanted sex, unintended pregnancy and STIs.

They are exposed to images and stories about sex in the media every day. They talk to their friends. They seek information on the internet. Not all of this information is accurate or empowering.

We also know that children and young people want to talk with their parents about sexual health. More than 50% of teenagers say they feel confident talking to their parents about sexual health. They rate their parents as their most trusted source of this information, just below doctors, and they use their parents much more than they use doctors.

So help them out by preparing yourself so you feel comfortable talking with them and can make the most of every opportunity:

- talk about the issue with your partner or other adults
- decide what values and messages you want to communicate and how these may impact on your child
- read up on current sexual issues (your local library or Family Planning Victoria's Resource Centre are great sources for books, magazines or DVDs)
- arrange a parent information session for you and your friends through Family Planning Victoria
- accept your child may have different views to your own
- remember, the aim is to discuss the topic with your child, not give a lecture – ultimately your child will make his or her own choices.

Is masturbation normal?

Yes, masturbation is a normal and healthy part of child development and is common in very young children. Like adults, children can find masturbation comforting and pleasurable. Masturbation at home and in private can be ignored – it is safe and normal.

Less private masturbation, more frequently observed in younger children, can be interrupted and children distracted. It is unhelpful to show a negative attitude as it won't stop it, and may affect how your children think and feel about themselves and their sexuality. The best approach is to present your children with a positive lesson about the difference between public and private behaviour.

Should I worry about 'sex play'?

Nearly all children engage in some kind of 'sex play' – playing mothers and fathers, doctors and nurses or just looking at each other's bodies. Sometimes, like much of childhood play, they are mimicking adults. In most children this is normal behaviour – it is safe, happy and involves looking not touching ('You show me yours and I'll show you mine') and copying grown up behaviour like pretend kissing and flirting.

If you feel concerned or uncomfortable about your children's play, a good approach is to distract your children with another activity.

Talking about sexuality and giving your children information about their bodies will also help satisfy their curiosity and allow you to teach the differences between adult and child and public and private behaviour.

What if my child doesn't ask questions?

It is important to show our children we are always willing to talk about sexuality. This means more than just waiting to answer questions. Sometimes there are no questions. If this is the case, use other ways of getting the conversation started.

You can:

- leave some books or pamphlets around the house
- use everyday events such as a visit by a pregnant friend as discussion starters
- ask you child about their health program at school
- include children in adult conversations
- watch TV programs with them and use the storyline to start a discussion
- ask direct open-ended questions to your child, e.g. 'What do you think about...?'

What if my child uses offensive language?

It is common for children to experiment with language. Children will imitate others and repeat words, sometimes innocently, sometimes to get a reaction. If you find their choice of words indecent or offensive, explain how you feel and why. For example, you might find their language sexist, unkind or confusing – tell them and explain why. If they are using words incorrectly, explain the correct meaning and check if this is what they meant.

It is also important to clarify the language used by others. Many sexual terms are used as putdowns or forms of abuse, and usually reflect ignorance and fear. By challenging such language and talking to your children about prejudice and discrimination, you promote respect for others and show your children you can talk about these issues openly and positively.

What if my child's gay?

Homosexuality is not good or bad, it is just how a person is. In Australia, between 8 and 14% of young people are attracted to people of the same sex. That means if you got 100 young people together, between eight and 14 of them would be attracted to people of the same sex.

When you talk about homosexuality, convey a sense of understanding and acceptance. The best starting place is to check your own attitudes and challenge stereotypes (such as 'only sissies cry' or 'Girls/boys don't do that'.)

If you're at all concerned about your child's sexuality, read Making Sense. You'll find it (and other useful links) in the sexual health information section under same sex attraction for parents on our website.