

Why We Should Teach Children About Sexual Health

Below is a question that was received by email from a parent. We hope it helps to illustrate the importance of teaching children about sexual health at an early age:

Q: I have a 4-year-old son, and just this week he has started asking me questions about his body and where babies come from. My friends tell me I need to be honest with him and use proper names, but why? I think it's kind of cute when he calls "it" his "doo-doo"!

A: Your concern reflects the fear of many parents that teaching young children about sexual health will somehow cause them to grow up too fast or, even worse, cause them to experiment with sex. But research shows the opposite – it is the curiosity of uninformed children and teens that encourages them to experiment and can place them in potentially exploitative situations. In a society where we don't talk openly about sexual health issues, I don't blame parents for getting stressed about the birds and the bees. It can be a daunting task just to figure out where to begin teaching about sex, never mind actually talking about it with your children! But don't worry – there's help! In her book *The New Speaking of Sex: What your children need to know and when they need to know it*, Meg Hickling lists three main reasons why we need to talk to children at a young age about sexual health – they all have to do with protection and prevention.

1. Young children (age 2-4 years) are easiest to teach. They haven't learned that it can be embarrassing to talk about bodies and sex, and can name the penis like it's the elbow! By the time they get to Grade 4 or 5, on the other hand, children are completely grossed out about anything to do with private parts, relationships, and especially, S-E-X. We have to surmount the embarrassment barrier before they can accept the information they need. While teaching in a Grade 5 classroom, a student once asked me "What possessed you to do this job?" He couldn't believe that I actually talk about sex all day, voluntarily!
2. Children need to be armed with accurate information about sexual health before they get their questions answered on the playground, by older friends or on the internet. They need to have the knowledge necessary to dispel the crazy myths they hear at school (i.e. Mountain Dew kills sperm), decipher what they see in the media, and permission to check out the facts with mom or dad rather than accept everything they hear as the truth.
3. Studies from all over the world consistently show that children who are educated about healthy bodies and healthy sexuality are protected from child sexual abuse. Even if children are not asking questions yet (some never will) we need to give them information about their bodies and help them to develop strong personal boundaries. Sexual offenders (85% of which are known to the victim) prey on children who aren't educated about their bodies and therefore lack the skills to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate touching. These children find it hard to say "no", especially to an adult, and may not report abuse for fear of getting in trouble.

Well, now that we know there are some pretty good reasons WHY we need to talk to our children about sexual health, WHAT exactly do we need to say? I would start by explaining to your son that he has three private parts on his body (mouth, breasts, and genitals) and that he is the boss. No one can touch them or look at them without his permission. Then teach him the technical terms for the body parts, like penis, vagina, vulva, testicles and scrotum. If you aren't used to using these words, you will need to practice them. In the wise words of my friend and fellow sexual health educator Alice Bell, say "penis" 50 times next time you're vacuuming. It will get easier! You'll also need to explain to your son how babies are really made when sperm enters the vagina to deliver sperm to the egg cell. Yes, use the S-E-X word! Don't forget to mention that the baby grows in the uterus, not the tummy, and that it is born through the vagina or by cesarean birth. There's more, but I won't stress you out too much all at once – we'll continue this later. Give it a try, and let me know how it goes!

P.S. The book *Where Did I Come From?* by Peter Mayle would make great bedtime reading.

Smart decisions start here.

t 604.418.9417
e saleema@saleemanoon.com
w www.saleemanoon.com

