

Fastbreak For Fathers

a monthly e-mail to help you be the kind of dad your child needs you to be.

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In this issue: Talking with your kids about sex.

OBSERVATIONS

I'm conflicted . . . I want my kids to know everything about sexuality and nothing about sexuality. Because of this, I probably send mixed messages about one of the more important topics there is for us to discuss. I hope I don't portray a hear no sex, see no sex, speak no sex mentality, but I must confess I am tempted to quickly back off from the topic when I sense their discomfort (probably a result of my discomfort!). Let's establish the fact up front — most dads are uncomfortable talking to their kids about sex. Now that we have confessed our uneasiness, we need to boldly go where few dads dare tread.

Sexual messages seem to be everywhere, yet relatively few dads talk openly with their children about sexuality. For this reason, sex has become both America's most popular topic and its best-kept secret.

Many dads avoid talking openly about sexuality with their children because they're embarrassed or don't know how to start the conversation. But not having these important discussions leaves our children vulnerable to the unrealistic sexual messages they receive from advertising, music, video and perhaps, yourself.

You are the primary sexuality educator of your children whether you are intentional about it or not. Your children receive verbal and non-verbal messages about sexuality from you every day. The tone of your voice as you respond to their questions, the look on your face as you comment to another adult, even your reaction to something on television or the radio gives your child messages about sexuality. Your children's most important source of information about sexuality is you — their parent.

Many parents are waiting too long and not talking enough when it comes to what their kids need to know. According to a survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now (part of a national initiative called *Talking With Kids About Tough Issues*) 39% of the kids between 8 – 11 year olds whose parents said that they have spoken to their child about the basics of reproduction indicated that they did not recall the conversation (29% of kids 12 – 15 did not recall the conversation). The survey also indicated that of those children who have had conversations with dad, either alone or with their other parent, 9 out of 10 reported having a positive experience. They felt they received good ideas and that the conversations were helpful overall. Even during talks about sex, where kids said dad was less comfortable having the conversation, kids still thought talking was helpful. So dads . . . let the talking begin!



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IDEAS

Contrary to popular opinion many children want guidance about sexuality from their parents. What they shy away from is “the talk.” They don’t want a lecture, and they often are as embarrassed as you are about the conversation, but conversations (note the plural) are needed.

There are a number of great resources available to help you talk with your kids about sexuality. I encourage you to check the local library or bookstore for some that reinforce your family’s values.

Probably the best thing you can do however is **practice**. The evaluations I collect in the parenting classes I teach on talking to your kids about sexuality, indicate that the most beneficial part of the class is practice. Parents are glad that they devoted concentrated time to gather their thoughts on the subject, and that they actually had the opportunity to practice conversations about sexuality with other parents – dads found it much easier to say masturbation in a conversation with their son after having practiced the conversation with another dad who is as uncomfortable as they are. Consequentially, they were better prepared not only for “the initial talk,” but also for opportunities and questions that arise during the regular comings and goings of life. It may sound foolish, but one of the best things you can do is practice with your spouse or a close friend (talking about it that is!).



As you think about your first or next conversation with your child consider these thoughts from Stanton and Brenna Jones authors of the book *How & When to Tell Your Kids About Sex: A Lifelong Approach to Shaping Your Child’s Sexual Character*:

- **You are the principle sexuality educator of your child.** You will either have an anemic, unintentional, mixed-up and hence negative impact, or a powerful, deliberate, clear and positive impact.
- The best conversations occur at “**teachable moments**” when discussion and instruction mesh naturally with the events and needs of daily life. One of the best goals for parents to strive for is to become an “askable” parent whom kids can come to with questions.
- **First messages are the most potent;** it is far more powerful to form a child’s view of sexuality from scratch than it is to correct the distortions they might pick up elsewhere. In this regard most dads need to push themselves to discuss more than they think, or wish, was adequate.
- **Accurate and explicit messages** are far better than cryptic, vague ones.
- **Positive messages** are more potent than negative messages.
- **Repetition is critical;** the most important messages about sexuality rarely “get through” on the first try.
- Sexuality is not the most important thing in life. We must strive to **put sexuality into its proper perspective.**

When talking with **elementary children** the focus of your conversations should be: the correct names of sexual organs and body parts, explaining sex and reproduction, personal boundaries, pregnancy and building healthy relationships. If they are old enough to ask questions, they are old enough to receive correct answers. Clarify the question and answer it briefly and simply. If they want to know more, they will ask additional questions.

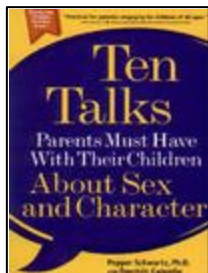
Middle school students need to talk about sexually transmitted diseases, emotions, the consequences of sexual relationships and the benefits of abstinence. As embarrassing as it may be, you should not avoid the topics of masturbation and oral sex. This is also the time to begin talking about why people date and healthy dating relationships.

Discussions with **high school students** should include wise decision making, setting a standard and living by it, and self-discipline. Your conversations should continue the topics of sexually transmitted diseases, healthy dating relationships and everything listed for younger children.

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RESOURCES

Talking with Kids About Tough Issues website: Talking With Kids is a national initiative by Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation to encourage parents to talk with their children earlier and more often about tough issues like sex, HIV/AIDS, violence, alcohol, and drug abuse. This is a great online resource: <http://www.talkingwithkids.org/dads/index.html>

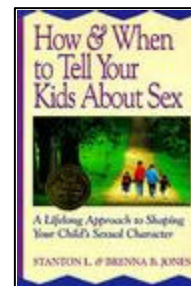


Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children About Sex and Character by Pepper Schwartz and Dominic Cappello.

Ten Talks offers advice on exactly how to begin and what to say – not just about sex, but about safety, character, peer pressure, ethics, meeting people on the internet, and mixed messages from TV. This innovative and illustrated book helps prepare kids for the complex world of relationships, sex, and growing up. Schwartz is a professor of sociology at the University of Washington in Seattle and past president of the Society for the Study of Sexuality. Cappello is a nationally recognized designer of parent-child communication programs and the creator of the National Education Association's "Can We Talk?" Parent Education Programs.

How & When to Tell Your Kids About Sex: A Lifelong Approach to Shaping Your Child's Sexual Character by Stan and Brenna Jones.

Stan and Brenna Jones also suggest that sex education is really not so much a matter of providing information, as it is a matter of deliberate character formation. This resource, written from a distinctively Christian perspective, helps parents to develop the relationship and provide the guidance that will help their children appreciate and honor their sexuality. The authors have also created a series of age-appropriate books that parents can interact read together with their children. Jones is Provost and Professor of Psychology at Wheaton College.



“You can’t be the kind of dad that you want to be. You can’t be the kind of dad that you wanted to have. You’ve got to be the kind of dad that your child needs you to be.”

- Roland Warren, The National Fatherhood Initiative

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