

HEALTHY CONVERSATIONS

Sex and Sexuality

Healthy Conversations: Sex and Sexuality

Let's go through nine basic practices to establish healthy language and behavior around sexuality and some general rules you can set.

1 Use Appropriate Language

Your child may have learned or adopted a different name for a body part. Be sensitive and understanding while teaching them to use the proper name. Using the proper terms helps children grow comfortable with talking about what is happening with their bodies. Especially for children who have experienced body trauma, it helps them develop a more positive attitude toward their bodies.

A general rule includes:
Don't use sexual language.

2 Maintain Respect for Modesty

Young children may not fully understand the concept of modesty, but you can start laying a foundation for future discussions by establishing some family rules everyone follows. The rules should include respecting each other's need for privacy in certain situations like dressing, bathing, and using the restroom.

A general rule includes: Don't show your private parts to others, and don't look at others' private parts.

3 Clarify Safe vs. Unsafe

Children need help understanding the difference between a good and bad touch. Explain that a "safe touch" is a way people can show that they care for each other or help others (for example, hugging, holding hands, or changing a baby's diaper). An "unsafe touch" is the kind you don't like or that makes you uncomfortable (like hitting, kicking, or touching private parts). Define for your child which parts are private. (A common memory trick is describing them as those covered by a swimming suit. They will more likely recognize an "unsafe touch" if they have this guideline in mind.)

Teach your child that it is not okay for anyone to look at or touch your child's private parts, or what is covered by their swimsuit. Explain that the only exceptions to this are hygiene (like bathing or using the toilet), health (including doctor visits or injuries), and changing clothes.

Some general rules include: Don't touch others' private parts, and don't allow others to touch your private parts. Don't touch your private parts in public.

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4 Teach Space Boundaries

Children also need help understanding that most people feel uncomfortable when you enter their personal space without consent. You can teach boundaries using a hula hoop or the arm's length concept. You can also use games like Simon Says and Mother May I to demonstrate asking for permission and respecting verbal boundaries.

A general rule includes: No making other people feel uncomfortable with your behavior.

5 Empower them with Refusal

Reassure your child that they have the right to say "no" and refuse any touch that they don't like or that makes them uncomfortable. Give them options for greetings. For example, let them know if they do not want a hug, they can give a high-five or a wave. Also, instill in them that they should tell you or another trusted adult about any confusing or scary touches. This helps your child learn that it is your job to protect them and that you take that job seriously.

6 Control Media Exposure

Research shows that sexually explicit media exposure in early adolescence can damage a child's mind in many ways. Your child may have already seen sexual activity in person or online. It is our responsibility to protect them from encountering harmful content. Explicit adult sexual activities can appear in evening television shows, commercials, movies, video games, YouTube, and even cartoons and children's channels. You can protect your child's exposure through parental controls and increased supervision.

7 Review and Reinforce

Children are vulnerable and at risk, as they meet and interact with other adults and children. Make talking about body and sexuality rules as normal in your home as the rules for crossing the street and good table manners. Some good opportunities to talk to your kids about personal safety are bath time, bedtime, and before any new situation.

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8 Expect Questions

Children tend to ask a lot of questions. Given that these practices will likely be new to your child, they may have a lot of questions. Give them plenty of space and permission to ask whatever they are wondering about. Their questions and our answers will depend on the child's age and developmental understanding.

People in your child's past may not have respected or modeled safe body boundaries.

So, if you observe any unhealthy patterns or false understandings, it is likely something they learned through observation. You get to empower them with the appropriate thoughts and behaviors. If you want help with implementing any of these practices, there are many resources available to help caregivers begin and continue these conversations with children.

Here Are Some Tips: Healthy Conversations: Sex and Sexuality

Don't laugh or giggle, even if the question is cute or funny, or react with anger. You want to be a safe place for them to bring their questions. Ensure your child knows they don't need to be ashamed of their curiosity or lack of understanding.

Be brief, and answer in simple terms. Let your child set the pace, and give them only the information they are looking for.

Follow up your answers with "Does that answer your question?"

Listen and observe your child's reactions.

Be prepared to repeat yourself.