

Let's Talk About Sex, Part 1

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Sarah here. We're continuing our mini-series on challenging conversations. We've covered medication as well as talking with your kids about their medical, mental health and/or learning diagnoses. Last week, Lisa covered talking with your kids about problematic friendships. This week, I'm tackling a conversation topic that creates a tremendous amount of stress for some parents: sex. Since this is a big topic that we get loads of questions about, I thought I'd break it up into parts.



Let's be clear: whether parents talk with their kids about sex or not, kids *get* sex education from one source or another. Other kids or teens at school, older siblings, TV, the internet, school...kids are going to learn about sex from somewhere. As with most challenging topics, wouldn't you rather they learn from you? What I'm focusing on today is parents opening the lines of communication to talk with their kids about sex. In other words, today is about just getting started.

One question that often comes up when Lisa and I work with families is, **"At what age do I talk with my kids about sex?"** That depends. In many cases, it's better to start that conversation younger with developmentally appropriate information. You won't be as detailed at that point, and it won't be the last time you discuss the topic. But, for many families, starting the sex talk around age 8 makes sense.

Now, I know some parents may be thinking, “What?! That is way too young!” I’m suggesting starting younger for several reasons. First, by beginning the sex talk when your child is young, you get ahead of the curve- you’ll be the one framing your child’s sex education, rather than playing catchup or correcting misinformation they’ve received elsewhere. Second, talking about sex can go hand-in-hand with talking about development, puberty and physical changes. Some girls begin developing breasts and get their periods for the first time around age 8 or 9. While boys may not experience erections until they are around 11, some start puberty early. Third, whether adults want to acknowledge it or not, some youth begin having sex at a young age. One way to help ensure that your child knows that sex is for later in life—not for childhood—is to provide them with useful information about relationships, consent, and sex.

So, **how do you start the sex talk?** You can begin the conversation by assessing what your child knows already. You may find out what terms they’ve heard before (making out, hooking up, sex, etc.) and whether they’ve heard their friends or siblings talk about sex. You may also talk with them about whether they know where babies come from and how babies are made. Now, don’t start the conversation unless you’re ready to have it right then! Because while your 8-year-old may tell you that they haven’t heard of anything besides hugging and kissing and they have no idea how babies are made, they may already know some stuff you didn’t realize they knew or there may be some misinformation you need to correct. Or they may turn around and ask, “Hey, wait- how *are* babies made?”



To start that initial conversation when you assess what your child knows, keep it casual. It doesn't have to be a big, serious thing. Have this initial conversation in a setting you and your child are comfortable in. It could be during their snack at the kitchen table or while you guys are in the car listening to tunes or watching TV.

You could start out by asking if any of their friends or classmates have a crush on anyone or have a boyfriend or girlfriend. You can also ask them if *they* have a crush or a boyfriend or girlfriend, but it may feel less threatening to ask about peers first. From there, talk about what it means to them to have a boyfriend or girlfriend or be "dating." Ask directly whether it involves hugging or kissing or "other stuff." Whether in the same discussion or another, talk with your child about what friends and classmates talk about. Like, do they talk about stuff like kissing or making out or sex? You can just ask these things in sequence- not making a big deal out of any one term. See what they say. Similarly, in that same conversation or in another, ask them whether they know where babies come from and how babies are made. Sometimes there's a natural context to bring these things up- if characters in a TV show or movie you're watching kiss or there's a character who is pregnant, it may be an easy time to have these conversations.



Next week, we'll cover key points that you may make during the sex talk. To prepare, take some time over the next week to reflect on what you think your child knows and messages that you want to make sure your child takes away from "the talk." Think about how *you* and your partner learned about sex- did someone have "the talk" with you? Did you learn at school?



From friends? Or were you sort of left to figure it out on your own? And finally, think about what you want your child's overall learning experience to be. Most parents do want their kids to develop a healthy attitude toward sex, but do you want things to be very didactic and informational or do you want it to be more of a discussion? Thinking some of these things through will help you figure out your own personal approach to the sex talk. We'll provide more ideas for how to have the talk this next week!