

Why having the sex talk early and often with your kids is good for them

October 10 2017, by Veronica I. Johnson And Guy Ray Backlund



Talking to your kids about sex is important, even if they don't welcome the conversation. Credit: SpeedKingz/Shutterstock.com

Parents may be [uncomfortable](#) initiating "the sex talk," but whether they want to or not, parents teach their kids about sex and sexuality. Kids

learn early what a sexual relationship looks like.

Broaching the topic of sex can be awkward. Parents may not know how to approach the topic in an age-appropriate way, they may be uncomfortable with their own sexuality or they may fear "planting information" in childrens' minds.

Parental influence is essential to [sexual understanding](#), yet parents' [approaches](#), attitudes and beliefs in teaching their children are still tentative. The way a parent touches a child, the language a parent uses to talk about sexuality, the way parents express their own sexuality and the way parents handle children's questions all influence a child's [sexual development](#).

We are researchers of intimate [relationship education](#). We recently learned through surveying college students that very few learned about sex from their parents, but those who did reported a more positive learning experience than from any other source, such as peers, the media and religious education.

The facts of modern life

Children are exposed to advertising when they're as young as six months old – even babies recognize business logos. Researcher and media activist Jean Kilbourne, internationally recognized for her work on the image of women in advertising, has said that "Nowhere is sex more [trivialized](#) than in pornography, media and advertising." Distorted images leave youth with unrealistic expectations about normal relationships.

Long before the social media age, a 2000 study found that teenagers see [143 incidents of sexual behavior](#) on network television at prime time each week; few represented safe and healthy sexual relationships. The

media tend to glamorize, degrade and exploit sexuality and [intimate relationships](#). [Media](#) also model promiscuity and objectification of women and characterize aggressive behaviors as normal in [intimate relationships](#). Violence and abuse are the chilling but logical result of female objectification.

While there is no consensus as to a [critical level](#) of communication, we do know that some accurate, reliable information about [sex](#) reduces risky behaviors. If parents are uncomfortable dealing with sexual issues, those messages are passed to their children. Parents who can talk with their children about sex can positively influence their [children's sexual behaviors](#).

Can't someone else do this for me?

Sex education in schools may provide children with information about sex, but parents' opinions are sometimes at odds with what teachers present; some advocate for abstinence-only education, while others might prefer comprehensive sex education. The National Education Association developed the [National Sexual Health Standards](#) for sex education in schools, including age-appropriate suggestions for curricula.

Children often receive [contradictory information](#) between their secular and religious educations, leaving them to question what to believe about sex and sometimes confusing them more. Open and honest communication about sex in families can help kids make sense of the mixed messages.

Parents remain the primary influences on sexual development in childhood, with siblings and sex education as close followers. During late childhood, a more powerful force – [peer relationships](#) – takes over parental influences that are vague or too late in delivery.

Even if parents don't feel competent in their delivery of [sexual information](#), children receive and incorporate [parental guidance](#) with greater confidence than that from any other source.

Engaging in difficult conversations establishes trust and primes children to approach parents with future life challenges. Information about sex is best received from parents regardless of the possibly inadequate delivery. Parents are strong rivals of other information sources. Teaching about sex early and often contributes to a healthy sexual self-esteem. Parents may instill a realistic understanding of healthy intimate relationships.

Getting started

So how do you do it? There is no perfect way to start the conversation, but we suggest a few ways here that may inspire [parents](#) to initiate conversations about sex, and through trial and error, develop creative ways of continuing the conversations, early and often.

1. Several age-appropriate books are available that teach about reproduction in all life forms – ["It's Not the Stork," "How to Talk to Your Kids About Sex"](#) and ["Amazing You!: Getting Smart About Your Body Parts"](#).
2. Watch TV with children. Movies can provide opportunities to ask questions and spark conversation with kids about healthy relationships and sexuality in the context of relatable characters.
3. Demonstrate openness and honesty about values and encourage curiosity.
4. Allow conversation to emerge around sexuality at home – other people having children, animals reproducing or anatomically correct names for body parts.
5. Access [sex education](#) materials such as the [National Sexual Health Standards](#).

The goal is to support children in developing healthy intimate relationships. Seek support in dealing with concerns about sex and sexuality. Break the cycle of silence that is commonplace in many homes around sex and [sexuality](#). Parents are in a position to advocate for sexual health by communicating about sex with their [children](#), early and often.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Why having the sex talk early and often with your kids is good for them (2017, October 10) retrieved 28 January 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-10-sex-early-kids-good.html>

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