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## Talking to primary school children about sex

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### Summary

- If you are unapproachable, your child will turn to other sources of information that may not be reliable, such as friends.
  - Find out what sexuality education your primary school provides and support them in the provision of age-appropriate information.
  - Read age-appropriate books on sex together with your child.
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Primary school children need age-appropriate information about bodies, puberty, sex and reproduction. This is not one big talk, but lots of little conversations repeated.

Puberty brings about dramatic physical and emotional changes that may be frightening to an unprepared child. Your talks will need to include topics such as the stages of sexual development, what to expect during puberty, sexual responsibility and relationships.

### Understanding your child's sexual development

It is more common to hear parents swapping stories about children's first teeth and first steps than it is to hear about a child's sexual development. This is understandable, as it is often seen as a very personal aspect of a person's growth and development. Yet this lack of general knowledge about what is 'normal' sexual development can lead to unnecessary anxiety about children's interest in nudity, 'rude' things and sex.

It is important to understand the stages of sexual development your child is likely to go through at different ages and what you can do to help them adjust to the changes they will experience. Parents are often relieved to hear that helping their child towards a happy, healthy sexuality does not come from any 'one big talk' that must be word perfect.

### Talking with children about sex

Sex education for a primary school child mostly occurs in the way we talk about body parts and body functions, how we teach children to care for, respect and protect their bodies, and when we prepare our children for puberty. Choosing the right age to answer questions such as 'Where do I come from?' and 'What is sex?' is more about how comfortable your family feels talking about such topics, rather than there being a perfect time.

Many children will have asked the question by the time they reach school. By grade three, they will have a keen interest and will have formulated some kind of theory. Many children will also have made the link between reproduction and sexual pleasure, and will be entering into schoolyard speculation and curiosity.

Talking about these issues shows children that they can talk with trusted adults. Families lay the groundwork for children to feel okay about their bodies and body functions, and to feel confident to ask questions and seek help.

School programs are vital to support this process. Developing good sexuality education programs shows that the community takes responsibility for this aspect of children's growth and development. If families and schools won't take the subject on, children will turn to other sources of information that may not be reliable, such as friends, the Internet or the media.

### Normal sexual development of a primary school child

Don't be horrified or alarmed if your child has an interest in sexual issues or displays certain sexual behaviours – this is completely normal. In the primary school years, typical behaviours can include:

- They become modest and embarrassed about being naked in front of their parents.
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- They start gravitating towards same-sex friends and may complain about ‘girl germs’ or ‘boy germs’ when speaking of the opposite sex.
- Games with other children could include kissing games and marriage role-play.
- Children are curious about gender differences, sexual intercourse and pregnancy, and may discuss these issues among themselves with varying degrees of accuracy.
- Sex play that began in a child’s earlier years, such as ‘playing doctor’, may continue because children of this age are interested in knowing more.

### **General suggestions**

Suggestions on talking to your preteen about sexual issues include:

- Don’t wait for your child to ask questions. If they haven’t said anything to you by the time they are 10, it is likely that shyness or embarrassment will stop them from this point on.
- Some children may feel more modest by age six and might want privacy in the bathroom. This is a good chance to make sure they know that they can say ‘no’ to touching that they do not want.
- Masturbation is normal and healthy for children and may start long before puberty begins. Children just need to know that it is something to do in private.
- Many parents begin to talk about conception when their children are still pre-schoolers. Certainly it is important to start the conversation by the time they are eight or nine. If your child hasn’t asked, you could try starting with a question such as: ‘Have you ever wondered how you were born?’ Look for opportunities to introduce the conversation – for example, you may choose to use a book or to comment on a pregnant relative.
- Some girls will begin breast development and periods at age eight. By age nine, start a conversation with boys and girls about ‘growing up’ and changing bodies.
- Don’t assume that the lengthy talks you have already had have stuck. You will need to go back to topics (in fact, this is the best way to create open communication).
- Make sure your child knows who they can talk to about embarrassing personal ‘stuff’. Talk with them about who they would talk to if they needed an adult’s ear but were reluctant to come to you.
- Find out what sexuality education your child’s primary school provides and support them in the provision of age-appropriate information.

### **The changes of puberty**

Puberty brings about dramatic physical and emotional changes that may be frightening to an unprepared child. It can be reassuring for children to learn when their family members started noticing changes in themselves. Talk about how you felt and how you managed tricky situations like periods or wet dreams.

Suggestions include:

- Start talking about puberty-type issues at age nine.
- If you are unsure or unclear about the changes of puberty, find out.
- Use age-appropriate sex education materials, such as books, to help explain to your child what changes they will undergo.
- Girls can start their periods as young as eight years old. Make sure they know what to expect. Show them what tampons and sanitary pads look like and, as the time approaches, equip them with a ‘pad pack’ for their school bag.
- Boys need to know about unwanted erections and wet dreams before they happen, so that these occurrences don’t alarm them.
- Inform girls about male pubertal changes, and boys about female pubertal changes.

### **The biology of sex and reproduction**

Suggestions include:

- Be honest and truthful. If your child asks ‘Why do men and women have sex?’ don’t just answer ‘To make babies’. Explain that people also have sex because they enjoy it and it feels good.
- If they ask about same-sex relationships, tell them that some people have sex with people of the same sex.

- Use age-appropriate materials, such as books, to help explain the issues.
- The Hormone Factory is a website aimed at 10 to 12 year olds that explains puberty, sexual intercourse and sexual issues in a clear, light-hearted way. You could browse through the website together, clarifying any questions your child may have.

### Personal safety and wellbeing skills for children

Children need to learn important skills and knowledge to help protect their personal safety and wellbeing. You can help:

- Teach your child the names of the sexual parts of the body and body functions – this helps them to communicate more clearly and contributes to their safety and wellbeing.
- Help them to learn online safety skills – the ThinkUKnow website has an Internet safety program that provides advice for parents.
- Maintain an environment in which your child feels safe talking about their feelings and problems.
- Encourage your child to know they can decide who touches them.
- Help them to identify a network of support, including teachers, who they can turn to.
- Teach your child about secret touch – this is most effective and easily understood by children using language such as: ‘It’s not OK for an adult or older person to touch a private part of your body for no reason and ask you to keep it a secret.’

### Feelings and relationships

Suggestions include:

- Think about your own moral, ethical and religious sexual standards so that you can better explain your point of view to your child. It may help to discuss these issues first with your partner.
- If you have firm views about sexual issues, now is the time to start talking to your child about them. Be prepared for the possibility that your child may agree with you now, but over time, may either accept or reject your point of view.
- Stress that relationships are about respecting yourself and the other person and having consideration for your partner’s feelings.
- Discuss sex in its wider context, as an important part of adult life that includes long-term relationships and families.

### What to do if you feel uncomfortable

You may have found that discussing sex with your child was OK in their preschool years, but the extra detail required as your child gets older feels too embarrassing to talk about. Perhaps you’ve been waiting so long for the ‘right time’ that you haven’t talked to your child about sex at all.

Suggestions include:

- **Use materials to help you get started** – find some age-appropriate materials, such as books or videos, and look through them with your child.
- **Be honest if you feel embarrassed** – if you can’t face talking about sex, provide the materials and let your child look through them alone. If your child has questions for you, try your best to answer them. If you are too shy, explain this to your child.
- **Use the Internet** – log on to a good website like The Hormone Factory. You could browse through the website together, clarifying any questions your child may have.
- **Ask someone else** – you could ask a trusted relative or friend to talk to your child in your place.
- **Explain your own attitudes** – keep in mind that your child won’t know about your morals, values and beliefs unless you tell them.

### Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- Your child’s school

- **Maternal and child health nurse**
- **Parent Line** Tel: **1300 30 1300**
- **Family Planning Victoria** Freecall: **1800 013 952** or Tel: **03 9257 0100**
- **ThinkUKnow – for parent advice on Internet safety**

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