



tools of the trade  
for family improvement



## TALKIN' BOUT THE BIRDS & THE BEES

*As a licensed professional counselor, wife and mother of three school-aged children, I certainly see the difficulties that families are faced with in today's fast paced world. Be sure that whatever you are struggling with, you are likely not alone. We all hit bumps in the road and could use a little help and support from time to time. Check in with me each issue as I offer you some "Tools of the Trade" to help you better manage and enjoy your life and your family.*

Parents want their children to grow up to be healthy, happy, and emotionally secure adults. Part of this challenge includes raising a sexually healthy child, a responsibility that often is not openly discussed and for which parents receive little, if any, direction and support. The most important piece of raising a sexually healthy child is to be an "askable parent". Let your children know they can come to you with questions. Starting early with sexuality education can help you communicate with your child now and during the teen years.

### Babies and Toddlers

Sometime between four and six months of age, a baby probably will discover his hands and toes. In a few more months, a baby boy will also discover his penis and a baby girl, her vulva. They are learning that it feels good to touch all of the parts of their bodies.

Your reaction to your child's discoveries sends an early message about sexuality. If you say "no" in a stern voice and move your child's hand away, you are teaching him that touching one's own genitals is bad, even that part of his body is bad. In contrast, if you say, "I know that feels good" and continue on with diapering, you affirm your child's sense that his body is good. Some parents even decide to give their children time without a diaper so they can continue their exploration.

### Preschoolers

Some time between the ages of three and five years, your preschooler is likely to wonder aloud where babies come from. Don't lie to your child; made-up stories will teach her that you are an unreliable source of sexuality information. Also try

to avoid the temptation to say, "I'll tell you when you're older." You want your child to feel that she can ask you anything and that you always will give her an answer. Children this age really do mean "where", it is hard for them to imagine that at one time they didn't exist. Ask your child for her theory, and then offer a simple definition: "You grew inside a special place inside your mom called a uterus."

Some preschool boys seem to touch their penis constantly while some toddler and preschool girls seem to "hump" every stuffed animal and couch arm they pass. Many parents have asked me in desperation, "How can I stop my child from masturbating?"

First, I remind parents that their child is not, in fact, masturbating for erotic purposes. Preschool children touch their genitals simply because it feels good and it's comforting.

Although this behavior is to be expected, a child does need to learn that touching one's own genitals should only be done in a private place, like a bedroom or the bathroom, and this lesson may take time to learn.

### School-Age Children

During the early elementary school years, one of the most important things parents can do is to introduce the concept of sexual intercourse to their child. A school-age child can understand that sexual intercourse is a way that adults demonstrate their love and share pleasure, as well as the way to make babies. If it's consistent with your values, you also can give your child an early message

about family planning—that is, people can choose whether or not to have babies, when to have them, and how many children they want in their family.

Look for a teachable moment to introduce this subject: It could be when you see a pregnant woman or are watching a sitcom together that has a bedroom scene. Think about the values you want to share: Does your family believe that intercourse is all right for adults in caring relationships or is it to be reserved only for marriage—or something in between?

School age children often get information on the playground from their peers. When talking about sex it is important to first ask them what they mean by the terms they are using. Second, you must correct misinformation. Third, share your feelings about the subject and impart your family's value system.

### Teenage Years

Sexuality is of primary importance in the lives of most teenagers and consequently, a major source of worry for most of parents. During the teen years young people usually begin to seriously experiment with sexual behaviors. It is also during this time that they develop a stronger sense of their own sexual identity, including their sexual orientation. Roughly 9 in 10 teens say that they are glad to talk to their parents about alcohol and drugs, violence, AIDS, and sex. The same number say that their parents have given them good ideas on how to handle these issues in their lives. Yet, almost half of all American parents don't talk to their teens about romantic relationships, the decision to become sexually active, abstinence and contraception, or sexually transmitted diseases. Fewer still ever talk with their teens about masturbation, sexual orientation, orgasm, or sexual pleasure. **Start early**—Don't wait until your children are already well into puberty to have "The Talk." Instead, make sex a topic of conversation from the very start.

**Talk in the car.** You have privacy, and your teen can't just get up and walk away.

**Tell your teen where you stand.** It's natural for teens to turn up their noses at their parents' ideas, acting as though they've never heard anything quite so dumb before. But, in spite of these shows of independence, adolescents really do care what their parents think, especially about the important issues like what's right versus wrong, and what's safe versus dangerous.

**Leave books around.** There are lots of good books that explain about sexual anatomy, the changes of puberty, ways people make love, and the emotional aspects of sex.

**Let the doctor help.** Family doctors, pediatricians, and nurse practitioners are trained to talk with teens about sex. Sex talk is one of the basic components of the routine "check-up" for teens.

**Get in the habit of listening.** Get into the habit of listening without passing judgment, not just about sex, but about everything. You don't have to agree and in the end, you still make the rules. But by taking time and effort to listen before you react, you let your teen know that you value their ideas, and that makes it much more likely they'll value yours in return.

**Respect your teen's privacy** It isn't reasonable, or necessary, for an adolescent to tell his parents every detail of his personal life. You need to know that your teen is safe, and knows enough to make wise decisions. But one of the main tasks of adolescence is to separate emotionally from one's parents, so it's healthy for teens to have privacy, too.

**Show, don't tell.** Of course, sex is much more than just the physical acts, it's really about relationships. Sexually healthy parents model healthy attitudes in their own relationships, and they are appropriately affectionate in front of their children. Their children learn that men and women can treat each other with respect and they learn that people can disagree and still love each other. This not only provides children with a sense of security in their family, but also gives them a model for their own adult relationships.

*The purpose of this column is to provide you with some "tools" that can be used in a variety of households and situations. I encourage you to adapt what you have learned to meet your needs and the needs of your individual family. If you have any questions about this topic, or have a suggestion for another article please contact me: Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., Licensed Professional Counselor at I. E. Counseling 908-456-1871 or email me at [hkbrogan@iecounseling.com](mailto:hkbrogan@iecounseling.com).*

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