

THE "Talk"?

Make healthy sexuality an ongoing conversation

by dr. leslie solomonian, nd

When my nine-year-old daughter came in from school one day, I asked if she wanted to help me write an article for parents about helping kids develop a healthy sense of sexuality. "Sure!" she shrugged, without missing a beat or raising an eyebrow. She settled in at the table where I was working – a reflection of how normal this kind of conversation is in our household – and dug in, ready to dispense her wisdom onto EcoParent's readers.

I started by asking her what sexuality is. Many parents think of sexuality as something that becomes an "issue" during puberty. However, humans are sexual beings from the womb to the grave.

RACHEL SAYS:

SEXUALITY IS

- » Gender ("what's in your head ... if you think you're a boy, you're a boy") ... usually this matches what your body looks like, but sometimes it doesn't; gender should never be forced on anyone
- » Your physical body ... if you have "boy" parts or "girl" parts
- » Making babies
- » Having sex with someone else, kissing, hugging, holding hands ... not just "penises in vaginas"
- » Having "alone time"
- » Who you "like" (sexually or romantically)
- » Your sense of what it means to be male or female; this is based on what you see in media and culture. For example, what magazines show us is "beautiful"

Sexuality encompasses not only physical sexual function and reproduction, but sexual identity, orientation, gender roles, sexual expression, intimacy, and pleasure – all of which have relevance to sexual health at all ages and stages of life (see Figure 1). The World Health Organization defines sexual health as: "A state of physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence."

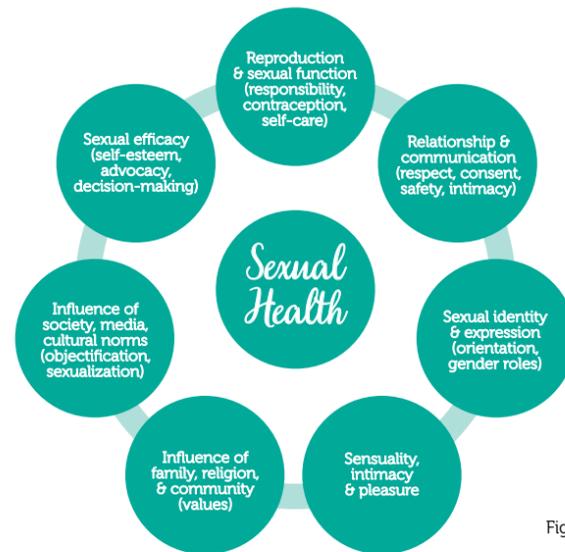


Figure 1

Go Ahead ... Ask Me Anything

Parents and caregivers are the best primary sexuality educators as it is their role to share their values; support the development of self-esteem and pleasure as it relates to the body; teach skills of communication and consent; and introduce a healthy sense of gender. Early childhood is an ideal time to establish a foundation of accurate and open communication about aspects of sexuality. When parents talk to kids openly (including, but not *only*, about sexuality) and listen warmly and non-judgmentally, young people report feeling closer to their parents and having healthier peer relationships. Surveys demonstrate that these youth engage less often in risky sexual behavior, often delaying and reducing frequency of intercourse; demonstrate a decreased risk of both committing and/or experiencing sexual abuse and assault; have a reduced number of sexual partners; and show an increased use of condoms. Although it can feel uncomfortable at first, when parents talk to kids early and often about sexuality, the discomfort recedes and conversations become more natural as the topics get more difficult, significantly reducing the ick factor of having "the talk" at age 13. This approach is also more likely to produce adults who engage in safe, pleasurable, and responsible sexual expression. An "askable parent" is someone who:

- » Is warm, honest, and respectful with their children
- » Is open to communication; avoids laughing or getting angry when children ask questions
- » Seeks to understand what is behind the question being asked; listens with engagement
- » Is willing to admit and navigate discomfort
- » Keeps explanations simple, age-appropriate, and leaves the door open to more questions
- » Is willing to acknowledge when they don't have the answers, and is open to seeking them out

Healthy Basics

Talking about sex need not be explicit, especially when we consider all the facets of sexuality. From an early age, children develop a sense of values and norms from their family of origin, media, and their community. How they are touched and spoken to, and what they see modelled affect their attitudes, values, and behaviours. "Responsive"

parenting (i.e. empathy, affection, and modeling clear and consistent boundaries) contributes to strong self-esteem and healthy intimate relationships in adolescence and adulthood. Skills of conflict resolution, decision making, problem solving, communication, and consent can be supported in many contexts; these are transferable skills that can be applied throughout the child's entire life. Teaching about consent, for instance, can range from the innocuous, "What colour cup do you want to use for lunch?" to the potentially more involved, "Mom, Sally is into high-fives right now instead of hugs," which invites a discussion about respecting others' right to dictate how they are touched. Acknowledging and celebrating good sensations that a child feels (a cool breeze or touching a puppy's fur) and empathizing with discomfort establishes an expectation of healthy sensual pleasure. Prompt changing of diapers in infancy and practicing good hygiene during toileting teaches children to care for their bodies properly. It is normal and natural for infants and children to explore their bodies, including their genitals. Older children can be taught that touching their genitals feels good and is totally okay to do, but should be done in private.

"Wee-Wees" And "Ginies"?

When Rachel was two and my son was seven, my grandfather, who was 89, in the early stages of dementia, and hard of hearing, came to our home for a visit. As we were chatting, Rachel fell on her ukulele and let out a shriek. While no serious damage was done, Great-Grandpa asked what happened. "She hurt her *vulva*," explained her concerned older brother. "Her what?" replied Grandpa. "Her vulva!" emphasized my son. "Her what??" ... and it went on. We're not sure if the confusion was that Great-Grandpa couldn't hear what Noah was saying, or if he simply didn't know the word, but the scene made me laugh, as it spoke volumes to the fact that my seven-year-old-son confidently knew the correct name of his sister's body parts, and had no shame in speaking it. Healthy sexual development requires knowing what body parts are called, and having accurate information about bodily functions, including erections, puberty, menstruation, and reproduction. Children should be encouraged to use accurate terminology for all their body parts to allow for relaxed and open communication; this protects them from sexual abuse, as well.

RACHEL SAYS:

Parents should explain puberty and sexual function at an early age so that kids have a better understanding of how things work when they're older instead of being taken by surprise. It can also help to have age-appropriate resources around. Our favourite books are the series by Robie H. Harris, but there are many on the market; spend some time browsing your local library or bookstore and find something that speaks to you.

Gender Matters (Or Does It?)

Parenting is also an opportunity to examine conscious and subconscious biases about gender roles and sexual diversity as they are powerfully communicated to children, even wordlessly, and can influence sexual behaviour and experience in profound ways. A sense of low sexual power (most commonly experienced by females and LGBTQ youth) increases the risk of coercion and violence in sexual relationships. Adolescent males who hold traditional views of masculinity are more likely to engage in riskier sexual activities and foster less intimacy in