

HIV: Talking to Your Child About Sex

This handout answers common questions on talking with your child about sex and sexuality. This topic is important for all children to learn about, yet it can be quite difficult for parents to discuss. We hope these tips and guidelines will help you talk with your child about sex-related topics.

Why do I need to talk to my child about sex?

- As children physically mature, they need to learn about sex and sexuality. Parents play an important role in their child's learning about sexuality. You can teach your child what he needs to know so that he can make good decisions about sexual activity in the future.
- Learning about sex is a lifelong process that begins at birth. Family members, friends, schools and faith communities may play a role.
- Your child's thoughts and attitudes about sex are influenced by what he sees on TV and in movies, what he reads in books and magazines and by what he hears when listening to music.
- Many parents worry that talking about sex with their child will increase sexual activity. This is not true. However, not talking about sex can create problems.
- Talking to your child about sex early and often will let him know that you are open to answering questions and listening to his ideas and concerns, now and in the future.

- If you teach your child about sex, you can be assured that he will get the correct information and that it will be in line with your own moral values and beliefs. He will be less likely to get his facts from someone else, or to develop notions of his own that are not correct.
- While all children need to know about sex, being the parent of a child living with HIV infection means you have the added responsibility of teaching your child to protect his own health and the health of others.



What if I'm worried about how to talk about sex with my child? How do I prepare?

- You are not alone if you feel uneasy talking about sexual matters with your child. Talking about sex can be hard.
- Start when your child is young and add information over time. This way, you can build on past talks and provide more details when your child is ready.

(Continued on next page)

- Explore your own attitudes and feelings about sex. Read some books or talk with a trusted friend or other adult. The more comfortable you are with these subjects, the more confident you'll feel when talking about them.
- Create an atmosphere where your child can ask any question, on any subject, without worrying that you will get angry or overreact.
- If you are uncomfortable talking about these topics, it is OK to say something like this to your child: "You know, I'm uncomfortable talking about sex. I want us to be able to talk about anything — including sex — so please come to me if you have any questions or concerns. If I don't know the answer, I'll try to find out the answer for you."
- Be sure also to talk with your child of the opposite sex. If there is someone of the same sex as your child who has a good relationship with him or her, you may want to ask that person to discuss sex with your child. Try to make sure that gender differences don't make subjects like sex taboo.
- Talk about more than just the physical facts about sex. While your child needs to know this, she also needs to understand that sexual relationships involve caring, concern and responsibility. An understanding of the emotional aspects of sexual relationships may help your child make good decisions and resist peer pressure.
- Relax. Don't worry about knowing all of the answers to your child's questions. What you know is less important than how you respond.

How do I talk about sex with my child? What are the basic guidelines?

- Always try to be honest.
- Give only enough information to answer your child's question. Remember, education about sex is a process that occurs over time. Your child will ask more when he is ready for the information.
- Begin by teaching your preschool child the proper names for body parts and explain where babies come from in simple terms.
- Do the best you can. Your goal is to help your child become a responsible, well-informed adult.
- Make an effort to listen, answer questions and show love and respect for your child.
- At every age, your child needs to know that he can come to you with his questions.
- If your child does not ask questions, or starts at a young age to ask questions and then stops, take the lead by bringing up topics and providing information over time in a way your child can understand.
- There are no strict rules for teaching your child about sex. Each family and each child is different. It's a good idea to give children information about two years before you think they will need it. If you are not sure when to bring up a particular topic, ask your child's doctor for advice.

What do I teach at what age?

The table on the next page gives guidelines for what kids need to know at what ages. It is never too late to start, and it helps to understand the process as it relates to all ages. For example, if your child is school-aged, it may be helpful to review what younger children need to know in case you need to fill in any gaps. And, it may be helpful to read the sections about what preteens and teens need to know so you can plan ahead.

(Continued on next page)

Guidelines for teaching your child about sex

What does my young child need to know?	What does my school-age child need to know?	What does my 10- to 13-year-old need to know?	What does my teen need to know?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the toddler stage, children first start to notice that the bodies of boys and girls and adults and children differ. • Your child may play with his or her own genitals and may express interest in the genitals of other children. This is normal. If this happens, gently explain to your child what kind of exploration is OK and what is not OK. Try not to respond with shock or anger. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During the early school years, a child’s interest in sex often is less obvious. • This may be the time when children pick up sexual slang. • Up to around age 9, children often want brief and direct answers to their questions. • By about age 10, children should know about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), especially HIV. • Children this age want their parents to discuss difficult subjects with them. Your child will look to you for answers to her questions if she feels you will be open and that she can ask you freely without fear of consequence. • Keep in mind that children this age can only take in small bits of information at a time. Your child will not learn all that she needs to know from one talk. Wait between talks and when you have the next talk, ask your child what she recalls from your previous talk. This will help you correct any misinformation and fill in missing facts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most children start puberty between ages 10 and 13. Interest in sexuality often increases a great deal. Sexual organs start to mature. Sex glands start to produce hormones at an adult level. Spurts in height and weight, growth of pubic and other body hair, possibly acne, and voice changes for boys and breast development for girls all begin to occur. • At this stage, children often compare themselves with their friends. Because bodies do not mature at the same rate, children often wonder if they are normal. Girls mature about two years ahead of boys — a fact that often disturbs both sexes. • Girls need to know about menstruation. Boys need to learn about erections and “wet dreams” (also called nocturnal emissions). These topics should be explained to your child before they occur. Many experts feel it is best to tell girls about the changes boys deal with and likewise — to tell boys about the changes girls will undergo. • Some children start having sex in their early teens. Many young teens say they wish they’d waited until they were older to start having sex. Teach your child about the benefits of not having sex. • Make sure your child has information about STDs, birth control and safer, safest and unsafe sex. See our handout on <i>HIV: Teens and Sex</i>. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At this age, it is especially important that your teen knows she can come to you with questions. • Most young people reach their full physical growth during their teenage years. They become sexually mature and may have strong sexual urges. It is important that your teenager have all of the information about sex, sexuality and sexual relationships. Read our handout on <i>HIV: Teens and Sex</i> and then give it to your teen. • Talk to your teen about how a potential sex partner has the right to know about her HIV status so that the other person can make informed choices. • You may also want to read our handout on <i>HIV: Talking with Your Child</i>.

(Continued on next page)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Your child's health care provider
- Visit these Web sites:
 - www.kidshealth.org
 - www.seattlechildrens.org
 - www.teentalk.com
- Read our handouts on:
 - *HIV: Children 0 to 2 years old*
 - *HIV: Children 3 to 4 years old*
 - *HIV: Children 5 to 7 years old*
 - *HIV: Children 8 to 10 years old*
 - *HIV: Children 11 to 13 years old*
 - *HIV: Teens*
 - *HIV Facts*
 - *HIV: Making Medicines Easy*
 - *HIV: Infection Control*
 - *HIV: Talking to Your Child*
 - *HIV: Helping Children Understand the End of Life*
 - *HIV: Talking to Your Child About Sex*
 - *HIV: Teens and Sex*

The material for this handout was adapted from these helpful Web sites:

- www.avert.org
- www.medem.com/medlb/articleslb.cfm?sub_cat=269
- www.talkingwithkids.org/sex.html

Your public library offers many books about these topics for parents and children of all ages. Ask a reference librarian for help finding titles that are age-appropriate for your child. Preview the books to find the ones that fit your parenting and communication style.

Funds to develop this patient and family education material were provided by a grant from the Foster Foundation.

Disclaimer: The inclusion of any Web site link (or resource accessed through a link) does not imply endorsement by Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center. Seek the advice of your child's health care provider before you act or rely upon any information from these resources.

Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Please call Marketing Communications at (206) 987-5205.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Children's Hospital. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's health care provider.