

Raising Sexually Healthy Children

Raising sexually healthy children in our culture requires courage, knowledge and most importantly a proactive parenting style. Just as parents take an active role in helping their children develop healthy habits around nutrition, sleep, and exercise, they can be proactive in helping their children develop a healthy sense of sexuality. Why is it important? Because much of our culture encourages children, and adults, to adopt a sense of sexuality that's built on a foundation of fear and anxiety. To balance these messages parents need to be active in educating their children about their sexual lives. Sexuality's a lifelong developmental part of everyone's personality and includes things like gender roles, physical changes (puberty, menopause, etc.), emotional attractions, and our physical bodies. Very young children start to explore their bodies before they even have the words to describe what they're doing. But parents have those words and more: we have values to guide them, resources to educate them, encouragement to support them, and ears to listen to them as they struggle to develop as sexual beings. Following are four important ways parents can help their children grow up sexually healthy.

Increase Your Ability to Talk About Sexuality

"Sexuality" is different than "Sexual Intercourse." Research indicates that most parents talk to their teenage kids on some level about sexual intercourse, but have you had a conversation with your 3 year old about him/her touching his/her genitals? Have you had a conversation with your 5 year old about the "doctor game" kids sometimes play? Have you had a conversation with your 11 year old about kissing and other sexual contact? These are developmentally common behaviors. They're also great opportunities to help your child develop sexual values and decision making skills in a context that's relevant to her/him. Just as you educate yourself about your child's biological and educational milestones, you can educate yourself about your children's sexual milestones as well, so that you can be prepared for their needs. Here are a few communication tips:

- 1) Avoid "The Birds and the Bees" talk. This event usually ends up feeling like a lecture, and is nerve-racking for both the parent and the child. Instead, try having lots of little

talks every week or so. This will show that you're a parent who can be approached anytime about sexuality.

- 2) Enjoy one of the many sexuality education books made for parents and kids to read together.
- 3) Turn on the radio, TV, or DVD player. Our culture is overflowing with opportunities to talk about sexuality, especially if you expand the definition to include relationships, gender roles, etc. Unfortunately only two types of sexuality are prominent in the media: erotic sexuality and examples of how people use sex to hurt others. But these are good springboards to discussing many other aspects of your children's sexual lives.
- 4) Have a conversation with your partner within earshot of your child that embraces sexuality.
- 5) Ask about your kid's relationships. What are his/her classmates doing? Is she/he thinking about boys or girls yet? How does he/she make decisions about relationships that honor self/others? When these conversations begin before kindergarten, they're easier to have in middle and high school when the stakes are higher.
- 6) Be an askable parent. Make sure your kids know that they can come to you with any question they might have about sexuality, THEN, make sure you never make them sorry they asked. This is an important tool for raising sexually healthy children but not enough by itself; some parents wait forever for their children to approach them while their kids sexually develop by trial and error.

Teach Them Their Sexuality is a Great Thing

Children begin to associate feelings with their sexuality from a very early age. For example, a child whose parents are relaxed and comfortable when their child may see them naked learns that a naked body is an OK thing. If the same child's parents became anxious or condemning of the child's curiosity, the child is more likely to assume that her/his naked body is something to be anxious about.

If you adopt the attitude in your home that sexuality is a wonderful thing, you'll be bucking a powerful myth: Sexuality is Dangerous. We don't say that money or food are inherently dangerous, and yet both can be used to harm ourselves or manipulate others. The same is true with sexuality. The fact that some people use it in ways that are not caring to themselves or others doesn't make it any more inherently dangerous than money. In fact if we want our children to be responsible with their sexuality, the way to encourage carefulness is to teach them how wonderful it is. Children who understand this intuitively don't tolerate when sexual expression feels manipulative, uncaring, painful, or dangerous.

Teach Them Sexual Decision Making Skills

Parents are the most important sexuality educators of their children. Research overwhelmingly suggests that abstinence focused sexuality education does not result in delayed sexual contact. In fact, the very opposite may be true. This is because, while abstinence is a crucial part of any comprehensive educational plan about sexuality, focusing exclusively on abstinence denies the opportunity to address sexual decision making. If the answer is always supposed to be no, what is there to decide? On at least one occasion the answer for over 60% of high school seniors has been yes, and 100% of children have had to make a decision about their sexual expression. When, with whom, and how to express sexuality are questions that children struggle with on a continual basis. Teaching them decision making skills will help them figure out how to live their sexual lives in ways that closely reflect their values.

It's Never Too Late

Parents can start preparing their children for healthy sexual lives in the first couple years of life, but if you've missed that opportunity you can still be very helpful when they're teenagers. Research suggests that teenagers consider their parents the most important source of sexuality education, even when they consistently tell their parents they don't want to talk. Parents who start this education when their kids are teenagers may face unique challenges, however, including children who are too embarrassed or withdrawn to make themselves accessible. Would you give up discussing your child's nutritional health if they protested? How about their wellbeing in school? Of course not; you'd probably tell them that you'd like to understand why this is such a difficult subject for them, but that ignoring it simply isn't an option. The same can

be true with respect to their sexuality. They'll probably loosen up when they realize that you're not going to drop it, but if not, you can bet they'll be listening if you just talk.

Many children in our community grow up without guidance regarding their sexuality. All too often this results in a struggle to manage this area of their lives in ways that are caring to both themselves and to others. Fortunately, parents are the most important asset a child has in their efforts to grow to be healthy sexual people. By acknowledging their sexuality, teaching them it's a beautiful thing, and helping them develop values and decision making skills, parents can help their children grow to be sexually healthy adults.

For source information regarding any of the research mentioned in this article, contact Chris at chris@reynoldstherapy.com.