

*April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month.*

It's time... to talk to children about healthy sexuality.

Sexual violence is an issue that affects everyone in a community regardless of age.

Understanding and talking to children about healthy sexual development can help parents and caregivers to protect children from sexual violence.

What is healthy sexual development? Parents and caregivers often want to know what behaviors and expressions are part of normal sexual development for children. Since ideas of what's "normal" can vary depending on culture, beliefs, and other factors, let's focus on what healthy sexual development looks like. It's important to remember that:

Human beings are sexual beings from birth. It is common for children to be curious about the body and sexuality.

Children receive messages about sexuality from a very young age. Sexual behaviors can be ignored, highlighted, punished, or supported. For example, consider how differently parents may react to a child who touches their genitals while taking a bath. Such reactions send messages that may stick with children and help to shape their view of sexuality as they mature.

There are warning signs of child sexual abuse and it is important to know what they are. It is also important to know the difference between behaviors that are cause for concern and behaviors that are common and healthy.

Why talk to your children about sexuality? Prevent sexual abuse. Talking to your children about sexuality provides them with information that may help protect them from abuse. Basic information, such as using proper names for body parts, and understanding boundaries around sexuality—that certain parts of their body are private—can help children understand boundaries, identify abuse and tell someone they trust.

Open the lines of communications. Talking to your children about sexuality builds trust and lets children know that they can come to you for help. Talking discourages secrets and establishes that no topic or question is off-limits.

Lower their potential risk. Children whose parents talk to them about sexuality are more likely to delay intercourse and more likely to practice safer sex when they do become sexually active (Martinez, Abma, & Copen, 2010). Talking to children about sexuality doesn't give them permission to be sexually active, but it does ensure that they have the information needed to act in a healthy, responsible manner when they do become sexually active.

Tips for talking to your children. Talking to your children about sexuality can feel overwhelming. Here are some tips to make the conversation easier:

Do your homework. Many adults never received information on sexuality or sex education. Many parents don't know what to say.

The good news is there are great resources on the topic of sexuality and on how to address sexuality with children. If you feel unsure, read up on the topic.

Don't panic. If you appear nervous or embarrassed, children will notice and react to it with uneasiness. Keeping your composure can help children see that sexuality is not something to be ashamed of or embarrassed to talk about.

Don't lecture. Lecturing doesn't promote open dialogue. Make sure you are talking and listening.

Stay age-appropriate. Children need to know different levels of information at different stages

of human development. For example, a four-year-old should know the names of their bodily, but doesn't need to know details about sex. There are resources, below, to help you determine what information is age-appropriate.

**Start a conversation. Ask a question to start the conversation**

For example, for younger children ask "Do you know all the names of your body parts?" For older children, ask "Your aunt is pregnant, do you know what that means?"

**Communicate your values.** Children may be able to get factual information from other sources, but family is often the primary source for helping to develop an individual's sense of values, feeling and beliefs when it comes to sexuality will help you communicate these values to your child.

**Pay attention to what your children see, hear and say.** Children are influenced by the world around them. Music, TV, Internet and peers all provide children with messages about sexuality. Be aware of what they are hearing and look for teachable moments.

For example, if a 10-year-old says their classmate has a girlfriend, ask them what they think that means. This is a great way to start a conversation.