

EVERYTHING YOU WANT TO TELL YOUR KIDS ABOUT

Sex

BUT ARE AFRAID TO

Positive sexual health starts at home, so roll up your sleeves and get the conversation started.



Walking *the walk*

How one mom went from uptight to alright in learning to talk about sex with her kids.

BY ANNE BOKMA

When I was in Grade 5, my best friend told me a woman got pregnant when a man spit in her mouth. Sure, it seemed preposterous, but she pronounced this with such authority that I believed her. Besides, her father was the school principal, which gave her opinion added weight. This notion was cleared up the following year when my very religious mother quietly passed me a slim book that explained the mechanical workings of the sex organs and made it very clear that sex was just for making babies. It focused a lot on body parts, such as the somewhat menacing looking Fallopian tubes, while neglecting to provide the crucial information I was desperate for, such as how to kiss a boy. This, in addition to a few overhead anatomy slides projected on a pull-down screen by

a red-faced teacher in high school health class, was the extent of my sex education.

I wanted things to be different for my two daughters. So when they were toddlers, I pushed past my discomfort and used correct anatomical terms such as vulva and labia. When they were in preschool I read them *Boys, Girls & Body Science*, which explained how babies are made. I taught them about boundaries by explaining the difference between “good touch” and “bad touch.” I didn’t assume their future gender preference would be heterosexual, making it clear that if they ended up being attracted to girls that was perfectly fine with me.

By the time they started kindergarten, they knew more about sex than I did when I started high school. If anyone ever tried to pass off some

lame story about getting pregnant via mouth spitting, they’d be able to set them straight but fast.

I tried to project confidence during these discussions, but truthfully, I always felt self-conscious and a little too earnest. When you are brought up in an environment where sex is shadowed by shame and secrecy, you don’t suddenly start talking about it with the technical expertise of Sue Johanson and the frank flair of Mae West.

And it didn’t get any easier as they got older. One day, while driving my oldest daughter to Grade 6 band practice, she turned to me and said, “You know, mom, you think you’ve told us all about sex but there are still things I don’t know.” She then blurted out that some of the boys in the band made fun of her for playing the “tromboner.” She knew they

were referring to something sexual, but wasn’t sure what and was upset with me for not filling her in on this bit of sexual slang. I adopted a tone of cool indifference while matter-of-factly explaining what a “boner” was. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was talk about erections with my 12-year-old daughter, but I figured if she had the courage to ask, I had better show the same courage and answer as honestly and accurately as I could.

Not long after this, again while driving in the car, the term “blow job” somehow came up. I asked her if she knew what that meant and she said she thought so. I began to explain, “It’s when a man puts his...” And then, with the force of Wonder Woman attempting to deflect an evil assailant, she raised her arm straight up in the air, with her palm facing

a sex talk *timeline*

Alex McKay, PhD and Executive Director of the Sex Information & Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN), sketches out developmental milestones for learning about sexual health. “These are basic guideposts,” he says, noting that not all children develop at the same pace, and that sometimes physical development does not happen in step with emotional development. Regardless of a family’s culture or traditions, the goal for children is to be “comfortable in their own bodies and have a basic knowledge of reproduction. We don’t always get it perfect though.”

AGE
0-2

- > Learns correct names for body parts, including genitalia
- > Learns to tell the difference between male and female genitalia
- > Learns to experience pleasure from touch (cuddling, nonsexual touching, infant massage)

AGE
2-5

- > Learns basics of reproduction (a sperm and an egg join together to make a baby)
- > Learns basic rules of privacy (including private parts and talk about private parts) and personal space
- > Learns your body belongs to you
- > Learns the difference between good touching and bad touching

Thanks to those many awkward conversations about sex with my daughters, I eventually managed to lose much of my former prudishness.



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me as if to physically block my words from her ears, and yelled: “Stop! I don’t want to hear it!”

My strategy to try and be open and relaxed around the subject of sex seemed to have hit a wall. My kids just didn’t want to hear about it from me. It was time for someone else to take over. The schools tried to do their part but even teachers were uncomfortable with the material. One of my daughter’s middle school teachers confided he dreaded teaching sex ed and typically squeezed it into the last weeks of school to put off the inevitable.

EXTRA-CURRICULAR SEX ED?

With that conversation in mind, when they reached Grade 7, I signed my daughters up for a 25-week sex education program being offered Sunday mornings at a nearby Unitarian Fellowship church. Its comprehensive Our Whole Lives (OWL) program does not preach abstinence (although it points to benefits of delaying intercourse) and contains no religious references or doctrine. Classes are taught in Canada and the U.S.

Each week, trained facilitators guide groups of boys and girls in discussions on topics ranging from body image, to concerns about puberty, the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, responsible sexual behaviour, and how to know when they are ready for sex. They view slides of drawings of people having sex. They watch a video of a baby being born. They engage in role-playing scenarios where they

learn to stand up for themselves in pressure-filled sexual situations. In addition to teaching about the negative consequences of sex, such as unintended pregnancy and STIs, OWL also focuses on the positive aspect — that sex is a pleasurable and life-enhancing experience when it is consensual, safe, caring and respectful.

My kids did not go to these classes willingly. I had to bribe them with the promise of a future shopping trip. But by the third week they seemed to look forward to going and never once missed a class. They rarely spoke about what they were learning, but I knew they were in good hands. In fact, I’m convinced it’s the best sex education they could have ever received.

Just as I’m convinced the Ontario government is moving in the right direction with its new and expanded sex ed curriculum, which follows in a similar vein by talking openly about issues of consent, body acceptance, gender identity and safety. Thousands of parents kept their kids out of school last spring to protest this curriculum because they thought it was too explicit (and many felt it conflicted with their their religious beliefs).

TOO MUCH INFORMATION?

In fact, studies show that more information empowers kids. Sex ed curriculum helps them understand the biology of their bodies, provides information around the big changes puberty brings and emphasizes the need for tolerance around issues of

sexual orientation, gender and family structure. Kids who are “protected” from this information are often the ones who most need safe places to ask questions.

My girls, now 17 and 15, are just beginning to go on dates and my hope is that they are well prepared for all that will bring. Thanks to those many awkward conversations with them over the years, I eventually managed to lose much of my former prudishness around the subject of sex. So much so, that I recently enrolled in the in the 30-hour training course required to be an OWL facilitator.

I have helped lead a session with 12 middle schoolers during which I instructed them on the proper way to put on a condom. I channeled my inner Mae West and even made a joke about the ridiculous length of the cucumber and how it in no way reflected the actual size of the average erect penis, which measures about five inches. I snapped on the condom, explaining the need to leave a reservoir tip at the top and asked them each to follow suit and give it a try. Some were horrified, some giggled, some were quite proficient. In the end they all completed the exercise and I felt good knowing that one day, when they are ready for sex, they’d be prepared with this essential first hand knowledge.

Like many of my generation, I fumbled in the dark when it came to sex. Luckily there’s no reason to do that for kids today.

Anne Bokma is a frequent contributor to ParentsCanada magazine.

AGE
5-8

- > Understands basics of human reproduction (sperm from a penis fertilizes an egg in a uterus through a vagina)
- > Begins to understand that physical changes will occur when puberty arrives
- > Understands different sexual orientations (heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual) and gender identity

AGE
9-12

- > Understands and has a reasonably complete knowledge of the physical and psychological aspects of puberty
- > Understands the positive role of sexuality in relationships
- > Understands and is aware of the risks associated with being sexually active (delaying intercourse, contraception and safer sex)
- > Learns media literacy skills to understand and evaluate sexual imagery and messages
- > Learns social skills related to rights, responsibilities and consent in relationships (including social media)

13
AND
UP

- > Learns to use the information they learned from parents and teachers about sexual health and is comfortable with themselves as a sexual being.



HOT TOPIC YOUR CHILD'S SEXUAL EDUCATION

We asked parents to tell us how they handled their eldest children's sexual education. The age breakdown of eldest children was:
5 and under – 29%
Age 6 – 12 – 35%
13 and up – 36%

BABY TALK 77%

of children first asked how babies were made between ages 3 – 9

I got this!

- 75% of parents handled the question easily and matter-of-factly.
- 16% panicked
- 8% deferred to their spouse

SCHOOL'S IN 89%

of parents say schools play a role in their child's sexual education

Too much information?

- 59% of parents are concerned about the sexual content of television shows, even those aimed at youth audiences
- 54% note that stories in the daily news about sexual harassment and sexual assault are also a concern
- 75% of parents know their kids will hear information and misinformation about sex among friends and in the media

Lovely ...

Half of our readers have talked to their children about homosexuality and gender identity. **Those who have had the opportunity cited promoting acceptance and love.**

ON THE NOSE

When asked to **guess the average age people lose their virginity, 67% of our readers said between 16 and 18.**

According to Statistics Canada's 2009/10 Canadian Community Health survey of 15- to 24-year-olds:
30% had had sex by age 17
68% had had sex by age 19
86% had had sex by age 24

For SIECCAN's comprehensive Q&A on sex ed in Canadian schools, go to ParentsCanada.com/SIECCAN

Let's talk about *sexuality*

PFLAG is a national organization for parents, families, friends, and allies united with people who are LGBTQ. Anne Creighton, Toronto Chapter President, consults with parents and is often invited to give talks in schools. She spoke with ParentsCanada's Nancy Fornasiero about kids and sexuality.

PC: Are primary grades too early for kids to learn about sexuality?

AC: Not at all. We speak to students from Grade 2 upwards. We tell our own stories, focusing on the age of the children we are speaking to. So if I'm talking about my daughter, Amy, to a Grade 3 class, I talk about what it was like for her at that same age, because she was already being bullied by then.

PC: Amy knew she was gay in Grade 3?

AC: She started to realize she was different; kids can tell. Kids that age also have a sixth sense about who to bully. It's the person who's too smart or too fat or a little awkward. Amy gave herself away somehow as someone who was feeling a bit different, and she was persecuted for it.

PC: How do you handle the subject with kids who don't fully understand sexuality and gender differences?

AC: With younger kids, the message is mainly about understanding what we have in common and what differences we have. We talk about what we can change and what we can't. We ask children to think about people who get picked on. How can we make their days happier? We talk about being a good role model, because even Grade 2 students can be role models for kids in kindergarten. With older kids we tell the story of our teens entering high school. We discuss homophobia and coming out: things we wouldn't necessarily cover in junior grades, unless asked directly.

PC: Any dos or don'ts for parents who think their kid might fall somewhere on the LGBTQ spectrum?

AC: Don't ask! Kids need to be ready for that conversation, and the only way to know if they're ready is by letting them start it. All along though, send signals that you'd be okay with it. Introduce the subject when a natural occasion presents itself, and always make it clear that you love your kid, no matter what.

Let's talk about *consent*

While the idea of consent is introduced at a young age, it becomes more of a dominant theme once kids are in high school. Nina Solomun, a third-year university student, is a facilitator of Bad Subject Consent Workshops. The goal of the workshops, started in Toronto by Effy Min and Destiny Laldeo, is to further explore the idea of consent, and ultimately transform what has been termed a "rape culture" into a "consent culture". The workshops are given to Grade 11 English students. They start with a simple exercise: one partner tries to open the other's closed fist. "Students try everything from tickling the person to forcing the fist open," says Nina. "Then we ask them, 'did anyone consider asking the person to open their fist?'" From that first idea of asking comes the concept that consent isn't a one-time thing. "Consent is very complex. It's not just no means no, yes means yes. We teach them that they have to keep asking, keep checking in with verbal and non-verbal cues." Bad Subject recently received a Trillium grant to hire more facilitators and develop its website. **For more info go to badsubject.org or email effy.badsubject@gmail.com.**

