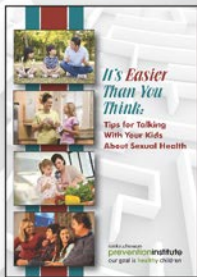


It's Easier Than You Think!

Tips for Talking with Your Children about Sexual Health*

*Talking about sex and sexual health with your children can be difficult,
and you may not know where to start.*

*This booklet will help you have these important
conversations with your children.*



This booklet is a complement to the video *It's Easier Than You Think! Tips for Talking with Your Children about Sexual Health* available from the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute (search 7-211). The video shares expert advice from a sexual health educator, an adolescent gynecologist, a pastor and human rights advocate, an executive director from an LGBTQ organization, and a clinical nurse specialist, along with parents.

*Title and ten tips from *It's Easier Than You Think! Talking with Your Children about Sexual Health and Well-Being* resource, adapted with permission from the Calgary Sexual Health Centre.

Why is it important for parents to talk with their children about sexual health?

Many Saskatchewan adolescents are participating in sexual activities that put them at risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies. Saskatchewan youth have the majority of cases of STIs when compared to other age groups. Saskatchewan also has the highest rate of live births from adolescent pregnancies in Canada (excluding the Canadian territories). These facts suggest that Saskatchewan adolescents would benefit from more sexual health education.

Adolescents need accurate information in order to make informed, healthy choices about their sexual health. Without this information, adolescents are at increased risk for STIs, unplanned pregnancies, and other negative health outcomes. Although many parents fear that sexual health education will lead to increased sexual activity, the opposite is actually true. Effective sexual health education is associated with reductions in adolescent risk behaviours and delaying sexual activity to an older age.

Adolescents need accurate information in order to make informed, healthy choices about their sexual health.

Why parents?

Although parents may find this role challenging, they play a vital role in the sexual health education of their children. Research shows that adolescents want to learn about sexual health from their parents. Importantly, research also shows that parents can positively impact their children's health by educating and talking to them about sexual health-related topics and by reinforcing safer STI and pregnancy prevention behaviours. Specific benefits to adolescents from parent-child sexual health communication include:

- increased knowledge
- delayed onset of sexual activity
- reduced sexual activity overall
- increased contraception and condom use in those who do have sex
- decreased number of sexual partners
- increased likelihood of having open conversations about sex with their sexual partners, improving their ability to discuss condom use and birth control

Parent-child communication about sexual health is also associated with improved parent-child communication overall.

How this booklet will help

This booklet provides ten tips, along with examples and helpful resources, with the goal of making it easier for parents to talk with their children about sexual health. The following tips are explored in this booklet:

1. It's never too late to start talking
2. Reflect on your own upbringing
3. Use correct language for body parts
4. Be honest
5. Communicate your values
6. Look for everyday opportunities
7. Listen and stay calm
8. Repeat, repeat, repeat
9. Look to your community for help
10. Have fun!

A few notes about terminology

The term “adolescent” refers to children between the approximate ages of 10 and 19 years old. As the focus of this booklet is on sexual health education, including education before children begin engaging in sexual behaviours, this early adolescent period is very important. That being said, the start of sexual health education will optimally occur much sooner than the age of 10 (e.g., learning the correct names for body parts), and this education can be lifelong.

This booklet uses the term “parent” to refer to primary caregivers of children, acknowledging that children’s primary caregivers may be someone other than a biological parent.



Tip 1:

It's Never Too Late to Start Talking

Parent-child communication about sexual health is important for reducing the risks of negative sexual health outcomes. Adolescents require accurate information in order to make informed, healthy choices.

Parent-child communication is more effective when it takes place before a young person becomes sexually active. Therefore, experts suggest that the optimal time for parents to start talking to their children about issues related to sex and relationships is when they are of elementary school age (5 to 11 years old). Certain topics (e.g., proper names for body parts, good and bad touch) should be taught even earlier.

If you have not yet started to have these conversations, it is okay. Remember, it is never too late to start having conversations related to your child's sexual health.

Why should we start these conversations so early?

- Parents often find it easier to talk about the subject with young children.
- These early conversations provide a basis on which to build the more difficult discussions that come later.
- Children are often more willing to participate in these conversations before they have become romantically and sexually involved.
- These conversations provide children with the information they need to understand risk behaviours and how to reduce risk before they become sexually active. Unfortunately, many adolescents engage in sexual behaviour before receiving relevant and important information from their parents.

This does not mean that you need to tell your 5-year-old everything about sex. A 5-year-old should know the proper names for body parts and should understand that his body is his own, in order to help prevent abuse. Puberty is another important early conversation. Use your child as your gauge for how much information to share. If she is still asking questions, this means that she wants more information. If you are unsure about how to start the conversation, there are many children's books on reproduction and puberty available. You can find one that you like and go through it with your child. If your child asks questions, provide simple, honest answers.

I haven't started to have these conversations yet. Is it too late?

While it is important to start having conversations related to sexual health early, particularly before children become sexually active, it is never too late to start having these conversations. Start where your child is at, and continue to build an ongoing conversation about sexual health.

How should I speak with my child about these topics?

While there is no script for exactly what to say at what age, there are some suggestions to help.

- Ask your child what she already knows. For example, you could ask, "What do you know about... (puberty, dating, getting your period)?" or "Tell me more about...?" When asking questions, be sure to use open-ended questions. These questions require more than just a "yes" or "no" response and allow for more discussion.

- Use everyday opportunities. For example, if an issue comes up on the news or during a television show, use this opportunity to talk to your child and provide him with accurate information. See Tip 6 for more information about finding everyday opportunities.
- Address common misconceptions. There are many myths and misconceptions about sex and sexual health (e.g., you can't get pregnant the first time you have sex, you can get an STI from a toilet seat). It is important to discuss these myths with your child.
- Acknowledge your child's feelings. If your child doesn't want to have a conversation, it may be helpful to acknowledge his feelings. For example, you could say, "I know you feel like you already know a lot about this" or "I know this conversation may make you feel uncomfortable". You can then use the opportunity to stress the importance of having these conversations. For example, you could say, "I want us to be able to talk about these things because I love you and I want you to have the information you need to make healthy choices."
- Avoid lecturing and do not focus solely on the negative consequences of sexual activity. This often results in defensiveness from adolescents, reducing the effectiveness of the conversation.
- Try, and then try again. If a conversation does not go the way you hoped, you will have other opportunities. Have more than one conversation. This will give you many opportunities to get it right and improve upon what did not go well the first time. See Tip 8 for more information about the importance of multiple conversations.

- Cover a variety of topics. Important topics to cover include development during puberty, healthy relationships, pregnancy and contraception, and prevention of STIs and unplanned pregnancies. It is also important for adolescents to have a chance to learn about how to negotiate healthy relationships.
- Focus on the positive. If your child brings up a subject you are uncomfortable with or discusses behaviours you may not approve of, try to find the positive in the situation. For example, you could say “Thank you for sharing this with me. I appreciate your honesty.” Then you can use the opportunity to share information about your values and expectations for your child’s behaviour (see Tip 5 for more information).
- You do not need to know it all. It is okay not to have all the answers. If you do not know the answer to a question your child asks, be honest and let your child know that you will find out the answer and get back to him. You and your child could also search together for the answer, using one of the reliable sources included in this booklet on page 39.
- Leave the conversation open. For example, you can say, “Let me know if you have any other questions”. It may also be helpful to share other resources with your child, including places to go for more information and support.

**When talking about sexual health,
start where your child is at, and continue
to build an ongoing conversation.**

The importance of an open, connected relationship

Conversations about sexual health, and any other topic, are a lot easier when you have built an open, connected relationship with your child. The following are tips for building this type of relationship and for staying connected with your child:

1. Communicate.
2. Have a teen-friendly house (e.g., make your child's friends feel welcome).
3. Stay involved in school activities.
4. Maintain family traditions, but make adjustments.
5. Search for shared interests.
6. Encourage your child's passions.
7. Lighten up.

Remember, you are not alone

It is important that you take the time to learn information related to sexual health so that you can provide your child with accurate information. There are many resources available if you have questions or need more information. You can speak with your healthcare provider, or refer to one of the trusted resources listed in the back of this booklet.



Tip 2:

Reflect on Your Own Upbringing

Your feelings about talking with your child about sexual health are likely impacted by the ways you learned (or did not learn) about sexual health. It is important for you to reflect on this when thinking about how you want to talk with your own child.

Questions to consider:

- How did you learn about sex and sexual health?
- What was good about your education? What wasn't so good?
- What information was missing from your own education?
- What would you have wanted to be different?

After you have thought about your responses to these questions, it will be easier for you to answer the following:

- What do you want to teach your child about sex and sexual health?
- How do you want your child to learn about these topics?
- What can you do to achieve these goals?

Learn and share this information

Many parents are motivated to provide better sexual health education than they received as young people. Their own lack of education may make them feel embarrassed and uncomfortable with the idea of talking with their children about sexual health. That is why it is important to learn as much as you can about issues related to sexual health and to know where to go for information when you have questions.

Thinking about what you wished you had known before you became involved in relationships and sex is a powerful reminder about the importance of talking with your own children.



Tip 3:

Use Correct Language for Body Parts

Teaching your children the correct names for their body parts, including their genitals, is a great first step in sexual health education. Ideally, parents should start using these terms with their children right from the time they are babies, the same way they teach their children about their other body parts. If you have not yet started using the correct names, remember – it's never too late to start!

If you do not feel comfortable

Perhaps no one taught you these words when you were growing up or maybe you think of these words as sexual words. Rest assured, if your child is young enough, he does not have sexual connections with these words and usually considers these words as normal as “hand” or “leg”. Name the genital just as you would name their other body parts during play, bathing, and toilet time.

If you feel uncomfortable, it may help to say the words aloud to yourself: penis, testicles, scrotum, vulva, labia, clitoris, vagina, breasts, and buttocks. It may also be helpful to find an illustrated children's book that you and your child can look at together.

Why is it important to use the proper names?

It can be confusing for children when some body parts have standard names that everyone uses (e.g., leg, hand, head) and others either do not have names or have 'cutesy' names (e.g., flower, cookie, wiener). Using the correct words for genitals prevents this confusion and provides other benefits.

- Gives children the language to explain potential health issues (e.g., what is itchy, what hurts).
- Gives children the language needed to tell you if sexual abuse has happened. Research indicates that knowing the correct names for their genitals makes children less vulnerable to sexual abuse and increases their ability to resist abuse.
- Promotes positive body image.
- Promotes parent-child communication.
- Makes future sexual health-related conversations easier.

Opportunity for more education

When you are teaching your children the names for their genitals, it is a great opportunity to teach them that their body belongs to them. It is important to teach them about good and bad touch, and about how to say “no” to bad touches. Tell your children that it is okay to say “stop” and “no” if ANYONE does or says anything that makes them feel uncomfortable. Children also need to know that it is important to tell a trusted adult if they have experienced a bad touch, that it is not their fault, and that you will support them no matter what.

Already using the correct names? You're off to a great start!

Research suggests that when parents experience success early on with easier topics (e.g., proper names for body parts), it results in more relaxed conversations about difficult topics later on.

**Helping your children understand that
they are boss of their bodies will
help to keep them safe.**



Tip 4:

Be Honest

When it comes to sexual health information, honesty is the best policy.

A common misunderstanding among parents is that sexual health education promotes early and irresponsible sexual activity among adolescents. In an effort to prevent this, some parents avoid discussing sexual health education topics with their children. Other parents may provide false information in an attempt to scare their children away from sexual activity. However, this is a situation where honesty really is the best policy!

Won't this information make my child want to have sex?

No. According to numerous research studies, adolescents who have accurate information related to their sexual health delay becoming sexually active, have fewer sexual partners, and are more likely to use contraception when they do have sex. Adolescents without this education are at increased risk of STIs and unplanned pregnancies. Adolescents need the information and skills necessary to protect themselves. Even adolescents who are not having sex require this information because saying “no” requires skills.



But I don't know what to say!

If you are unsure about where to start, or if you do not feel confident about your own knowledge related to sexual health, resources are available to help. Sexandu.ca is a great website, full of up-to-date information on STIs, contraception, pregnancy, consent, and more.

If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. For example, you can say, “I may not always know the answers, but you can ask me anything”. Tell your child that you will find out the answer and get back to him, or you can look up the answer together. This will help your child to understand that it is okay not to know all the answers and that it is important to find accurate information.

Remember, you do not need to know all of the answers, but you do want to be a reliable educator for your child.

Parents play a vital role in the sexual health education of their children.





Tip 5:

Communicate Your Values

One of the many benefits of parents educating their children about sexual health is that they are able to tailor this information to their individual child's physical, emotional, and psychological development. Parents are also able to share their own values, beliefs, and expectations as part of their communication with their children around sexual health.

Research shows that when parents communicate their sex-related values to their children (e.g., disapproval of early sexual activity) and set clear rules, their children are more likely to adhere to those values. Even for adolescents who do become sexually active, communication of values is associated with a higher likelihood of using birth control and having fewer sexual partners.

But my child already knows how I feel

We may believe that children understand how their parents feel and what their parents expect. If there has not been direct, clear communication, it is likely that your child does not actually know what you believe and how you feel. That is why it is important that you share your attitudes and values about sex with your child.

How to communicate your values

Before you can share your values related to sexual health with your child, it is important that you think about your values and determine why they are important to you. It is likely that your child may challenge you on your values, so it is helpful for you to understand why you believe the things you do. Share your values honestly and be sure to model them in your own life. Your own behaviour is another way you communicate your values to your child.



WHAT ARE YOUR VALUES?

It is important to share your attitudes
and values about sex with your children.

Look for everyday opportunities to share your values related to sexual health (see Tip 6 for more information). The media is full of sexual messages, providing many opportunities for discussions with your child.

Your child may not agree with your values, even after you explain your reasoning. If this happens, it is important for you to listen and stay calm (see Tip 7 for more information). This will show your child that you are open to his thoughts and ideas, and will increase the likelihood that he will continue to talk to you and come to you for information and support. Use this opportunity to share accurate information if your child is misinformed.

Parental supervision and monitoring are also important

In addition to accurate information and clear communication about values, adolescent sexual behaviours are also shaped by parental monitoring and supervision of adolescents' activities. Parental monitoring and supervision mean that parents know where, how, and with whom their children spend time. This should be done in the context of an open, loving parent-child relationship, where the child does not feel like their independence is being taken away.



Tip 6:

Look for Everyday Opportunities

Research shows that parents are in a unique position to shape the attitudes, values, and beliefs of their adolescent children about sex and sexual health. Parents are able to do this by providing accurate information about risks, consequences, and responsibilities and by teaching their children the skills needed to make responsible decisions. One of the easiest ways to do this is to look for everyday opportunities and teachable moments to start discussions about sexual health.

Examples of everyday, teachable moments:

- A friend or family member’s pregnancy
- Talking during a commercial break about a romantic moment in a television show
- Listening to music in the car and discussing song lyrics and what they mean
- Seeing a group of adolescents and asking your child what their peers do in groups
- Discussing what your child is learning in sex education classes at school

The following are some questions and phrases that can help to open and continue conversations with your child:

- What do you think?
- That’s a good question.
- Tell me what you know about that.
- Do you know what that word means?
- Let’s look that up together.
- Help me understand what you’re feeling.
- I’m really glad that you told me that.
- I may not always know the answers, but you can ask me anything.

The use of books and pictures to teach younger children about body parts, sex, and relationships works well. These conversations may be easier with older children if you are doing another activity while talking and listening. Use these opportunities to share accurate information, as well as your values and expectations around sexual behaviour (see Tip 5). Remember, the more frequent these conversations are, the easier and more comfortable it becomes for both parents and children to talk about sexual health topics.



Tip 7:

Listen and Stay Calm

Effective parent-child communication about sex requires more than providing accurate information. The way the information is shared and the relationship that it helps to form between the parent and child is also important. These factors impact whether a child will go to a parent for information and whether the information that is shared will be effective.

Suggestions for effective conversations

- Listen more and talk less. Listen patiently and calmly when your child talks, and ask for more information. For example, you could ask, “What do you know about ... (puberty, dating, getting your period)?” or “How do you feel about ... ?”
- Be receptive to your child’s opinions and ideas. For example, you could say “Thank you for sharing this with me.”
- Control emotional reactions to your child’s ideas and refrain from criticizing. If you react emotionally (e.g., anger, fear, disbelief, belittling) to what your child is sharing, your child may become defensive, reducing the effectiveness of the conversation. If your child shares information that is inaccurate, use the opportunity to provide accurate information or look up accurate information together.
- Be honest (see Tip 4).
- Attempt to keep the conversation informal or casual. This can be done by using everyday opportunities to raise issues related to sexual health (see Tip 6), as opposed to sitting your child down for THE TALK.

- Encourage your child to talk at her own pace by listening patiently and calmly. Reassure your child that you are listening, that you appreciate the information that she is sharing, and that you are there to support her.
- Leave the conversation open for future conversations. For example, you can ask “Is there anything that you would like to know more about?” Remind your child that you are available whenever he has questions.

Why is this so important?

If you are able to calmly listen to your child, he will be more likely to come to you with questions. Following the suggestions outlined above will help to decrease your child’s nervousness and his avoidance of these potentially uncomfortable conversations with you. Children who have these types of conversations with their parents are less likely to engage in sexual risk behaviours and are more likely to have sexual health-related conversations with their future sexual partners.



Parent-child communication about sexual health is associated with improved parent-child communication overall.




Tip 8:

Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

Repetition is an important part of all learning. Expect your child to ask questions repeatedly; this is particularly true for younger children. Remain calm, and continue to provide consistent, accurate information. Repetition helps to ensure that your child is remembering and understanding the information you provide. Repetition also helps to increase comfort around talking about sexual health, both yours and your child's.

Other benefits of repetition:

- Allows you to build on previous discussions, both by repeating previous information and by providing more details
- Increases the likelihood of an ongoing conversation, showing your child that he can talk to you about issues related to sexual health any time
- Associated with children feeling closer to their parents, and feeling more able to communicate with their parents about sex and in general
- Associated with children delaying sexual intercourse, and an increased use of contraception and fewer sexual partners in those having intercourse



**Repetition helps to ensure your child
is remembering and understanding
the information you provide.**

“But we have already talked about this”

- Your child may complain that you have already talked about these issues or may state that she already knows this information. Although you may feel relieved and may feel like you can stop talking about issues related to sexual health, it is important that you continue these conversations. You can tell your child, “I know you may feel that you already know this information, but it is important that we talk about this.” or “You may think I already talked to you about this, but today we are going to talk about something a bit different.” It may also be useful to ask your child questions about what she does know.
- Including information that is more detailed and discussing new topics may help your child stay interested in the discussion.
- Look for everyday opportunities to have these discussions (see Tip 6) so that these discussions feel more natural.
- If your child refuses to take part in these conversations, try again at another time or provide your child with books or websites containing accurate information (see the back of this booklet for suggested websites). Remind your child that you are there if she ever has questions.

It can be very difficult to have answers to all of your child’s questions, and it is even more difficult to know all of the information related to sexual health. Fortunately, there are many knowledgeable people and organizations available for information and support. It is important for you to know where to turn. It is also important that older adolescents know what sexual health services are available in your community.



Tip 9:

Look to Your Community for Help

If you have accurate information, you will be able to influence the sexual beliefs and behaviours of your children. If you feel that you do not have the information, comfort, or skills to provide this education to your child, look to your community for help.

There are professionals and programs available to help parents provide this information to their children. Refer to the organizations and websites listed in the back of this booklet for more information.

Other suggestions for where to turn:

- Local organizations related to the topics you want to discuss
- Your family doctor or nurse practitioner
- Sexual health educators/counsellors in your child's school
- Public health nurses
- Online resources and programs (<https://teachingsexualhealth.ca/parents/> is a particularly excellent resource, complete with information by age, information by topic, and detailed information about how to teach your child)

Choose resources that share accurate information about sexual health in a way you feel comfortable with.



Tip 10:

Have Fun!

Talking about sex and sexual health can be embarrassing and uncomfortable. Using humour can go a long way towards making it easier to talk about these topics. This doesn't mean that your conversations with your child need to be like a comedy routine – it is important that your child understands that the information being shared is important. However, it does mean that you can use humour to lighten the mood.

Humour is an essential part of the parent-child relationship and helps to build parent-child closeness. Other relationship characteristics include:

- mutual interaction
- parental openness
- parental support
- parental warmth

Research indicates that the relationship between a parent and child is an important determinant of whether parent-child conversations about sex and sexual health are effective. Therefore, building a strong and loving relationship with your child is important to ensure that the sexual health information you provide is respected and used.

How can I use humour?

- Make jokes or use humour in other ways when the conversation is feeling awkward or your child seems uncomfortable.
- Feel free to laugh if your child is using humour to hide discomfort.
- Share funny stories about your own experiences and your own sexual health education. These funny stories can be an excellent starting point for sharing information. Use these opportunities to find out what your child knows and what she wants to know more about.

**As with all aspects of parenting,
it always helps to have a sense of humour.**

Remember, you are not alone

There are many resources available if you have questions or need more information. You can speak with your healthcare provider, community organizations, or refer to one of the resources listed below.

For more information about ages and stages, and what your child may ask you about, refer to the parent section of the Calgary Sexual Health Centre's website (<https://www.calgarysexualhealth.ca/sexual-health-info/parent-information/>).

For more detailed information about how to talk to your child about his sexual health, refer to <https://teachingsexualhealth.ca/parents/>, an Alberta Health Services website.

For resources and support regarding gender identification and sexual diversity, refer to OUTSaskatoon's parent page (www.outsaskatoon.ca/parents).

For accurate information about everything to do with sexual and reproductive health, refer to www.sexandu.ca; a website from the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada. This is a great website for you to share with your adolescent, as it has accurate information on a wide variety of topics.

Helpful websites for adolescents:

www.advocatesforyouth.org

www.goaskalice.columbia.edu

www.plannedparenthoodregina.com

www.scarleteen.com

www.sexualhealthandrights.ca

www.saskatoonsexualhealth.ca

For more information about this resource, or to view related resources, refer to the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute's website (www.skprevention.ca).





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