

Talking to Children about Healthy Sexual Development

It is not about having “the talk.” Healthy sexual development is a life-long process just as any other developmental area. Relax. You want your child to understand that sexuality is a valuable part of the human experience. When you use respectful language for body parts, you help children understand privacy and are setting the stage for healthy sexual development. Regardless of the age of your child, keeping the lines of communication open paves the way for honest discussions. Learn what your child already knows by asking questions. Being prepared to respond to tough questions requires you examine your own values, feelings, and beliefs. Realize it is OK to say, “I don’t know.” There are many informative books and Internet resources to explore together. Children learn by observation – how you conduct yourself speaks louder than words!

Early Childhood (birth - 3 years)

- Teach children the correct terms for body parts.
- Teach children that you will respect their wishes regarding their body. Example: when they ask you to stop tickling, you stop. Give them permission to say “NO” to unwanted touch.
- Explain the difference between “surprises” and “secrets.” Use “surprises” to talk about positive things like a birthday present purchased for a sibling. Advise children that “secrets” can be dangerous.
- Begin talking about boundaries and privacy.

Late Childhood (4-8 years)

- Encourage children to use correct terminology to describe genitalia.
- Teach children the difference between safe/unsafe, appropriate/inappropriate touch.
- Do not force physical contact with a child.
- Give child permission to be private about his or her own nudity.
- Begin teaching the basics of reproduction (i.e. babies grow in a uterus).

Early Adolescence (9-11 years)

- Be clear about respect for people's boundaries and need for privacy.
- Talk about what is and is not appropriate during peer interaction.
- Discuss current Internet safety (including “sexting”) along with the social and legal responsibilities. Cell phones and social networking sites can be alluring and children are often curious risk-takers.
- Talk about reproduction and welcome questions. Do not exhibit shock when youth talk about sex.
- Encourage candid conversation. Use scenarios for youth to problem-solve.

Adolescence (12-18 years)

- Teens and preteens often spend a great deal of time wondering if they're "normal." Help them to understand that "normal" for everyone is different.
- Tell your adolescent what you believe in and why. Share your values and encourage them to verbalize theirs. Allow and accept differences in opinions.
- Be available and open to conversation (without judgment) on their terms.
- Talk less and listen more.

Awareness to Action Milwaukee is focused on preventing child sexual abuse by helping adults and communities take action to protect children. Services are FREE. More information? Please contact Ruth Miller at 414/671-5575 x30 or rmiller@theparentingnetwork.org. Our agency offers two services:

1. **Stewards of Children®** a workshop that teaches adults to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse. This workshop can be presented at daycare centers, schools, places of worship, or wherever there is an interest.
2. **Technical assistance in developing Policies & Procedures.** Guidance for organizations who want to develop or revise child sexual abuse prevention policies and procedures for their group or organization.

The Parenting Network is the lead agency for Awareness to Action Milwaukee. Awareness to Action is a program of Children's Services Society of Wisconsin with funding provided by the Children's Hospital & Health System's Child Abuse Prevention Fund and Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund. Protect Their Only Childhood and Stewards of Children are registered trademarks of Darkness to Light and are used with permission.