



Talking with your child about relationships and sexual health

For parents and carers of children
between 4 and 9 years old



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Further copies available from the resources department at your local health board.

www.healthscotland.com/publications

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Why is this booklet important?

If you feel uncomfortable talking about relationships and sex with your children, don't worry – you are not alone, many parents feel the same way. Thinking about the questions your children are likely to ask you about relationships and sex helps you prepare responses that makes these conversations less daunting. This booklet will help get you started.

It is primarily for parents and carers of children between 4 and 9 years old although some pointers have been provided for children up to 11 years old (another booklet for parents of teenagers is also available as part of this series – contact the resources department at your local health board for copies).

It has not been possible to provide detailed information to support parents of children with disabilities but we give some pointers on where to get additional information in the resources section (page 34).

Contents

Introduction	4
What is my role in talking about relationships and sexual health?	6
When should I start talking about relationships and sexual health?	10
School based sex and relationships education	18
How should I answer questions?	20
Model questions and answers	21
Sources of information and support	34

Introduction

Educating children about sexuality and relationships is about developing their confidence and self-esteem, knowledge of their bodies and the skills they need to build relationships. One of the main ways that children learn about relationships and sexuality is from their parents or carers. Even if parents don't talk about sex with their children, they give out strong messages about it.

Most children are naturally curious, and from the age of about two they will ask questions – Why? What? Where did I come from? Talking can really help. A study carried out by Southampton University has shown how important it is for parents or carers to talk to their children about relationships and sexuality. Children whose parents did not discuss relationships and sexuality began having sex earlier than children whose parents or carers were open.

Children need help to:

- become aware of their bodies;
- develop a sense of self-worth;
- protect themselves;
- respect differences; and
- cope with changing feelings and relationships.



Some parents or carers find the whole business of talking to children about relationships and sexuality difficult and embarrassing. But if you can talk freely to your children early on, you will find it much easier to deal with their questions as they get older.

This booklet will help you, as a parent or carer, to think about how you would like to deal with relationships, sexuality and growing up with your children – in a way that respects your values and beliefs, and theirs. Helping your children means finding ways to talk to them about relationships and sexuality in day-to-day life.

What is my role in talking about relationships and sexual health?

Your role is to be prepared to talk to your child about relationships and sexuality when the time is right, and encourage a two-way discussion. You may be uncomfortable or embarrassed talking about sex. Don't let this put you off, here are some tips on how to make it easier.

Start early

The earlier you talk about relationships the easier it becomes particularly when your child wants more detailed responses. From an early age most children already have an idea of the differences between boys and girls – and a natural curiosity about the world. When a child is mentally and emotionally ready for information, it is good to talk with them.

This booklet cannot do the work for you but it will help you to think through your approach so that you and your children feel comfortable!



Use everyday situations to start off with

Imagine what the world looks like to your child. What are the important things to them? The world of a very young child is self-centred and a simple response to questions is usually fine. Children can manage more detailed explanations as they get older.

There is no 'best' person for talking and listening

Some people feel that dad should handle boys' questions and mum should talk to girls. But life is not that simple. Not every family has a mum or a dad. You might also want to share your approach, and this booklet, with anyone who cares for your child, such as a grandparent or childminder.

It's a two-way street

Encourage a healthy two-way discussion between you and your children about relationships and sexuality that you can build on as your child gets older. A good starting point for discussion can be "What do you know already?" This tells you how much they know and what is really behind their question rather than trying to second-guess or avoid any kind of discussion at all.

Have booklets or leaflets available

Having information readily to hand means that you and your child can look at it together and discuss the contents. Factual information can be a useful tool to reinforce your answers to any questions raised (see details of resources and useful websites at the end of this booklet).

Be truthful and honest

Making things up will just confuse your child so try to avoid talking about storks and gooseberry bushes! Get your facts right. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so but try to find out later and let your child know what you have found out.

Listen and value what your child says

How carefully do you listen to what your child is saying? You might be surprised at your child's mature attitude to relationships and how much they might have in common with your own values. Also if you ask your child for their opinion, this will encourage them to feel good about themselves and be better prepared to take care of themselves. And ultimately less likely to get into situations they don't want to be in.

Keep telling your child you love them

Showing your child love and affection will give them an idea of what they would like for their own future relationships and will allow them to build those relationships on a basis of love and caring.

And keep talking

Communication is the hardest thing to do – giving up at the first difficult or awkward question is the easiest thing to do. But your children need your support even when they don't appear to want it. If discussions get a bit difficult, try talking to your doctor or health visitor or your child's guidance teacher – talking over these issues with someone else can help.

When should I start talking about relationships and sexual health?

Talking about growing up, relationships and sex is not a one-off talk but a gradual process of communication starting when a child is small and continuing until they are adults. Puberty can start as early as eight for girls and boys may also have wet dreams or erections when they are very young so it is important that your children are prepared and not frightened of bodily changes. The right time to start talking about this is not the same for every child.

- If you raise your child in an atmosphere of love, support and openness, this will prepare them as well as anything for their future development. These are the building blocks to education about relationships and sexuality.
- Don't always wait until your child brings up the subject of relationships or sex. Sometimes, you have to be the first one to raise the subject. Talk about this in relation to their age. You can use the many opportunities there are in the media to raise the issues around relationships and sexuality. (See the question and answer section.)



What do I talk about at what age?

From an early age, children are aware of differences between boys and girls. Questions about “where did I come from” or “why does Daddy stand up to wee?” are often asked by children as young as three. A simple, short but truthful answer is all that is required. Using books that illustrate parts of the body can be useful to raise the topic even where children don’t ask questions. This is also an opportunity to explain what is acceptable behaviour in public and in private as well as the differences between wanted and unwanted touching.

Once your child reaches eight, they will have discovered more about how their bodies work but they also need more information about how their bodies will be changing. This is important as some girls start having periods as early as eight so explaining what tampons are may be a useful way into this discussion. Also remember that boys should also be told about periods as well as being given information on how their own bodies will start to change over the next few years.

By the time your child reaches the upper years of their primary school life, it is a good idea to have discussed:

- **conception;**
- **what to expect at puberty and menstruation;**
- **romantic relationships, marriage and permanent relationships;**
- **sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and AIDS;**
- **gay and lesbian relationships; and**
- **how to avoid doing things they don't want to and thus keep themselves safe.**

By talking about these issues when they are 9, 10 and 11 years old, it will reinforce what your children will be discussing at school, seeing on TV or reading about in books and magazines and prepare them for secondary school.

You will find some useful addresses and contact numbers on pages 34 to 49 of this booklet. Remember you can always ask your health visitor, nursery or school for ideas and help on answering questions – this will help you to work out which answers are best for different age groups.

What about my own attitudes to relationships and sexuality?

You give out strong messages to children all the time about relationships and sexuality, even when you do not say a word!

- Your behaviour affects your children in all sorts of ways – from your attitude to nudity in the house to your own experience of marriage, partnerships and relationships. So, if there is a difference between what you say and what you do, children may notice this, especially as they get older.
- Sometimes a problem for parents or carers is finding the right words to use when talking about relationships and sexuality. Some families make up their own names for intimate parts of the body. As children get older, they may need help in learning the proper words to prepare them for coping with adult life. For an explanation of what your child will be introduced to at school, see page 18.

How can I help my child make the right choices in relationships and build healthy relationships?

Encouraging your child to feel good about themselves can help them to cope positively with influences upon them.

- If children develop a sense of self-esteem and they know about sexuality and relationships, they will be better prepared to build their own healthy relationships.
- Apart from you, children experience many influences on their views about relationships and sexual health: these include school, their friends, TV, magazines and the Internet. Feedback from surveys of both parents and young people indicate that they both would welcome more opportunities to speak to each other about what they learn from other sources but often lack the time to do this. By taking more opportunities to spend time with your child, you can help put what they hear and see into context and in some instances correct any misinformation. For example, explaining your own values and how they might differ (or be the same as) from these external influences will help explain why we have different views. Exploring “how to keep safe” such as not talking to strangers or telling a trusted adult when they don’t feel safe can help them avoid bad relationships.

What words should I use?

There are many different terms used for sexual body parts and different sexual behaviours. As well as the “correct” medical terms, children may have heard all sorts of different terms at home and through their friends and the media. They may be confused about the meaning of some terms and not appreciate that some words can cause great offence, although very young children will quickly learn their significance through your reaction to them.

As a parent, there may be words that you feel uncomfortable about. Make a list of all the words you can think of that refer to sexual body parts and sexual health. Look at the list and tick off those words you have difficulty saying. Are there other words you could use? Do you know the slang terms for these words?

You do not have to compromise your own standards but, as a parent, you are responsible for your child and he or she will no doubt learn slang words about sex in the playground so having an open discussion about what words they know and their meaning could avoid their inappropriate use.

What messages should your child understand and hold on to?

- **You are a special person, whatever you think and do.**
- **Be kind and respectful to other people and look after yourself.**
- **Your feelings about sex and boys and girls change as you get older.**
- **Talk to a grown-up you can trust if anything happens that you do not like.**
- **There are lots of types of touching, good and bad. You can say no to a touch that does not feel right.**
- **Your body is valuable and worth looking after.**

Talk to your children. Keep it simple when they are younger – you can give them more details, as they get older.

What happens if I don't talk to my children about sexual health and relationships?

Not talking about relationships and sexual health can influence how young people feel and behave for the rest of their lives. If you don't talk about these issues, your child might think that sex is scary and shouldn't be talked about. They might find it difficult to ask questions later about anything that worries them. Giving your child support, information and help to feel good about themselves can help reduce the chance they will become pregnant at an early age or get a sexually transmitted infection. This also gives you the opportunity to explain your own personal values and beliefs around relationships and sexual health giving your child the opportunity to adopt these as they are growing up.

School based sex and relationships education

What are schools expected to do about sex and relationships education? Your child's school will have received documents about sex and relationships education from the Scottish Executive. You may want to find out what your child's school is doing about this.

All schools must provide sex and relationships education, and work in partnership with parents about their sex and relationships education programmes, although this varies from school to school. The Scottish Executive has provided guidance for

Key Messages

The main features of a primary-school sex-education programme are likely to be:

- **respecting themselves and others;**
- **respecting individual differences;**
- **ways to express and deal with feelings and emotions;**
- **ways to keep safe; and**
- **developing positive and supportive relationships.**



local authorities, schools and parents that says that sex and relationships education should present the facts in an unbiased, balanced and sensitive way within a framework of sound values.

In primary school and then later in secondary school, sex and relationships education builds on what children and young people already know. It is an important part of health education, education for personal and social development, and religious and moral education programmes.

Schools may have their own programmes that include contributions from others, such as the school nurse or other health professionals who are likely to cover the physical changes that boys and girls experience at this age. Although all schools should be covering similar aspects of relationships and sexuality education, the topics may vary from school to school and may not be the same everywhere.

As a parent, if you have any issues about the sex and relationships education the school is providing, the first thing to do is to discuss them with your child's head teacher.

How should I answer questions?

Ask your child what they know – don't assume anything! Education about relationships and sexuality is not a one-off topic but part of an ongoing relationship with your child.

Before you have a look at some of the sample questions on the following pages, here are some points to bear in mind:

- Many of the scenarios come from parents themselves – they won't all apply to your situation.
- It is impossible to prepare for every question.
- The way you answer a question will depend on your child's age and stage of development.
- The question your child asks may not be the one you are expecting. They may also "test the water" by asking a slightly different question first. Listen and find out more before you answer.
- Remember, your own sex life is private. You do not have to answer questions about it. Being too open can be as disturbing for children as not being open enough.
- Ask your health visitor, nursery or school for ideas and help on answering questions.



Questions and answers

As a parent or carer, you know your child best and can only respond in the best way you can to the likely issue he or she might bring up. Remember, the way you respond will often depend on what you are doing and how you are feeling at the time.

On the following pages are some typical questions that children ask their parents and which parents themselves have provided to help you respond to your child. Although this booklet is primarily to help you answer questions asked when your child is aged between four and nine, we know that younger children also ask questions so some example answers for these are also included here.

Remember they are just examples – not “model answers” as there is no one right answer, but they may help you think about what you would say in similar circumstances.

Questions about sexuality and relationships

- 1 **"Where did I come from?"** asks your four-year-old.
- 2 Your seven-year-old comes back from school and asks: **"Am I sexy?"**
- 3 While watching the TV, your eight-year-old turns to you and asks: **"What does gay mean?"**
- 4 Your ten-year-old child sees a newspaper headline and asks: **"What does paedophile mean?"**
- 5 Your three-year-old child is touching her genital area while sitting outside in the sun. Your seven-year-old says: **"It is disgusting to touch yourself!"**
- 6 Your ten-year-old sees a red ribbon for World AIDS Day and says: **"How do you get AIDS?"**
- 7 Your eleven-year-old daughter says that her best friend has just started her periods. **When will she start? When will she get breasts?**

This booklet does not give you all the answers – you have to judge the right time and place for your child. Here are some questions and answers to help you be as ready as possible to talk to your child about sexuality and relationships.

- 8** “How do you stop having a baby?” asks your eleven-year-old.
- 9** “Why do some people get married and other people do not?” asks your nine-year-old.
- 10** “What does having an abortion mean?” asks your ten-year-old.

You can find ideas on how to answer these questions on the following pages.

“Where did I come from?”

asks your four-year-old.

This is the classic question! Before you start, it is a good idea to check the question by asking your child one such as “Do you want to know how you were made when you were a baby?”

A four-year-old child takes things literally so it is important to choose your words carefully and give simple responses. If your child is older (over eight), he or she may be ready for a more detailed answer.

Mandy: *“Mummy and Daddy made you. You started very small and grew in Mummy’s tummy till you were big enough to come out.”*

Tracey: *“You grew inside your Mummy. A baby begins to grow when an egg from Mummy and a seed from Daddy get together.”*

Your seven-year-old comes back from school and asks:

“Am I sexy?”

There are various sources that reflect society's obsession with being attractive. Even young children pick up these messages and can feel anxious and insecure about their appearance. You may need to check what lies behind this question.

Katy: “You’re too young to be sexy, but you’re beautiful. Where did you hear about being sexy?”

Tom: “No, but you might be seen as being sexy when you’re older. Being sexy can be about the way you feel but also about the way you make someone else feel.”

While watching the TV, your eight year-old turns to you and asks:
“What does gay mean?”

Children usually have no difficulty in accepting a variety of adult relationships. However, they are sensitive to your feelings and attitudes so if this is an area where you have difficulty, you will need to think through your response carefully. You can find out where your child came across the word “gay” as this is a chance to deal with any prejudice or intolerance.

Tracey: “Well, some men want to marry or live with women and some women want to marry or live with men. If you’re a gay man, you want to be with another man, and if you’re a gay woman, you want to be with another woman. What do you think about that?”

Katy: “Well, when you are grown-up, a man can fall in love with a woman and a woman can fall in love with a man. But ‘gay’ is when a man falls in love with another man and a woman falls in love with another woman. Our friends, Michael and Paul, are gay.”

Your ten-year-old child sees a newspaper headline and asks:

“What does paedophile mean?”

Children are likely to pick up the fear and loathing attached to the label “paedophile” and may have questions about what it means. This is an opportunity to reinforce messages your children will have received in school and what you may have already told them about keeping safe.

Tom: *“A paedophile is a person who wants to have sex with children when they are far too young to do that. They might also want to take pictures of children wearing no clothes or touch them.”*

Jane: *“A paedophile is a person who likes to take children’s clothes off and touch their private parts. It’s not nice and it’s against the law. If someone asks you to do something that you don’t want to, then talk to someone you can trust.”*

Your three-year-old child is touching her genital area while sitting outside in the sun. Your seven-year-old says:

“It is disgusting to touch yourself.”

Masturbation can be a very difficult issue for parents because of messages picked up in their own childhood. Small children explore their genitals from a very early age as part of the normal process of development. The way you react to situations like this can be important. You need to be able to set limits for what is private behaviour in an open and matter-of-fact way without any suggestion of this being ‘dirty’ or ‘harmful’.

Jane: *“No, it’s not. Your sister is only little and doesn’t know that she shouldn’t do that in front of other people.”*

Maggie: *“It’s not disgusting. It’s just something big boys and girls like you know to do in private.”*

Your ten-year-old sees a red ribbon for World AIDS Day and says:

“How do you get AIDS?”

At primary-school age, few children will have heard about sexually transmitted infections but more will have heard about HIV and AIDS. However, some will have picked up the wrong ideas and prejudices about AIDS, particularly about gay men.

As a parent, you do not have to feel that you must give an elaborate technical answer to this question. Children are naturally curious and will not expect a “school-type” explanation from you.

Mandy: *“It’s an illness people may get from someone if they share dirty needles or have unprotected sex without using a condom.”*

Jane: *“You can catch a disease called HIV, which turns into AIDS, by having sex with someone who has it without using a condom. Do you understand that? There are other ways too. Do you want to know about them?”*

Your eleven-year-old daughter says that her best friend has just started her periods.

When will she start? When will she get breasts?

It is important to be open with your daughter from her first question about menstruation, no matter how young she is. Girls need to be aware that it is perfectly normal for periods to start at any time between 10 and 15 years and sometimes as young as eight. (Also, do not forget boys who may have their own concerns and are often left out of these particular discussions.) Children feel anxious when friends develop at different times. This is when a child needs an understanding grown-up to help them.

Katy: "Everyone develops in their own time. Have you noticed any changes in your body that you want to talk about?"

Maggie: "It could be any time from now on. It will almost certainly be before you are 16. It tends to be the same in families and I started when I was around 14, so you probably will too."

“How do you stop having a baby?”

asks your eleven-year-old.

Question

8

This kind of question is unlikely to come from a younger child. However, children at school may have heard some things about condoms as a joke. As with other questions, it can be helpful to get an idea of what lies behind the question. You do not need to go into a very detailed explanation as if you were a family planning nurse, but a willingness to be open is helpful.

Katy: “You use something called contraception. There are different kinds of contraception, but if the man wears a condom, it can protect against catching diseases as well as helping to avoid having a baby.”

Tom: “Well, you know how babies happen, don’t you? It is possible to stop the man’s sperm and the woman’s eggs from getting together to make a baby. There are a few different ways. One is a pill that a woman can get from the doctor. She has to take it every day and not forget. Another is for the man to use a condom. It’s a special cover for his penis, which catches the sperm. It’s rubbery – a bit like a balloon! I’ll show you one.”

“Why do some people get married and other people do not?”

asks your nine-year-old.

There are many different kinds of family structures. Your child will experience many of these differences through their classmates at school. This may trigger a curiosity about these differences as your child compares them to himself or herself.

On the other hand, you may find yourself doing the same as your own views about relationships and marriage are challenged!

Jane: *“There is no law that says everyone must get married but a lot of people want to because they feel that a wedding makes being a couple more special. Some of our friends are married and some are not. People who are not married love each other just the same as people who are.”*

Tracey: *“Mostly it’s just a choice. Different people think different things. If people are religious, they may think it’s important.”*

“What does having an abortion mean?”

asks your ten-year-old.

This is not the kind of question a younger child will ask. However, an older child may hear the issue discussed on TV, radio or other media – and pick up on the controversial nature of this for some people.

You need to be clear about this issue from your own moral and faith perspective – you can do this without any complicated details. You might find it useful to discuss your answer with health or school based staff.

Mandy: *“Sometimes a woman decides not to have the baby after she finds out she is pregnant. Occasionally having a baby will make the woman ill or the baby growing inside the woman is very ill, the woman will go to hospital to end the pregnancy. This is known as an abortion.”*

Dave: *“Having an abortion means removing a baby from a woman’s tummy but not letting it live. Mummy and I don’t agree with abortions because we think that once a baby is in a woman’s tummy, it should be allowed to live.”*

Jane: *“If a woman is pregnant there can be reasons why she can’t have the baby. The operation to stop her having the baby is called an abortion.”*

Sources of information and support



Where can I get help or support as a parent?

ChildLine Scotland

Gives confidential information and support to young people. Contact them by telephone for free or by writing (no stamp needed) to Childline, Freepost 1111, Glasgow G1 4BR. The website gives information on the kind of things that concern or worry young people and can give you some pointers for potential discussion topics.

Phone: 0800 1111 (24 hours)

Website: www.childline.org.uk/helpandadvice.asp

Parents Enquiry Scotland

Offers support to parents and their gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender children across Scotland. Parents who have experience of learning to understand and support their own gay children operate the helpline.

Phone: 0131 556 6047

Website: www.parentsenquiryscotland.org



Parent Network Scotland

Run by parents for parents and offers information and resources to provide parents with new skills and support so that they can get on better with their children.

Phone: 0131 555 6780

Website: www.parentnetworkscotland.org.uk

Parentline Scotland

This is a free, confidential telephone helpline for parents and anyone caring for a child in Scotland. You can call about any problem, however big or small. Open Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 9am – 5pm and Tuesday and Thursday, 9am – 9pm.

Phone: 0808 800 2222

Website: www.children1st.org.uk/parentline

UK Parents

Provides information on a range of issues affecting parents, both mums and dads, from a range of different viewpoints and interests. Contains feedback from parents themselves about breaking down the barriers of sex education.

Phone: 0191 260 2616

Website: www.UKparents.co.uk



For parents and carers of children with learning disabilities

All children need information about sexual health and relationships regardless of any disability. But if you are a parent or carer of a child with a learning disability, finding resources that help them discuss body changes, relationships, keeping safe and sexual health can be a huge challenge. For a list of resources to support your role as parents, see

www.phis.org.uk/projects/download.asp?p=FCL or contact Health Scotland for your own copy (tel: 0141 300 1050). Many of these resources will be held in libraries for free use – and if they don't hold them, ask them to get a copy for you to look at and use.

British Institute of Learning Disabilities

Campion House, Kidderminster DY10 1JL

Phone: 01562 723010

Website: www.bild.org.uk



What websites would be helpful for my child?

There are many websites that children can visit – always remember to give them safe surfing tips. For help on this, visit www.besafeonline.org. Remember – you should visit a site yourself if you have questions or concerns about it.

Healthy Respect

Provides advice and information for parents and carers on sexual health and relationships as well as downloadable practical resources such as newsletters and toolkits.

Phone: 0131 536 9454

Website: www.healthyrespect.co.uk

The Hormone Factory

A website for children aged ten to twelve explaining sexual and reproductive development and the physical, emotional and social changes associated with puberty. It presents information in a clear, straightforward and light-hearted way to answer the questions this age group often ask ... and the ones they don't (but still wonder about).

Website: www.thehormonefactory.com

Thinkaboutit

A website from Health Scotland aimed at teenagers – sections on puberty and relationships also relevant for younger children.

Website: www.healthscotland.com/thinkaboutit



Where do I get information about what happens in schools?

Learning and Teaching Scotland

Provides guidance and resources for teachers and others working in schools. Guidance on how schools should consult with parents and the suggested programme content for sex and relationships programmes can be downloaded from this site.

Website: www.ltscotland.org.uk/sexeducation

Scottish Catholic Education Service

Gives information about Catholic education and Catholic schools in Scotland and offers support and practical resources to parents, students, teachers and others. This includes guidance on how to provide sex and relationships advice in line with the teachings of the Church in today's society.

Website: www.sces.uk.com

Parentzone

Managed by the Scottish Executive, this site gives parents access to resources and information about new and existing developments affecting the education of children and young people in Scotland.

Website: www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk



Where can I get information on young people's rights and the law?

The Scottish Child Law Centre

Gives information and advice about the law and children's rights.

Phone: 0800 328 8970 (free)

Website: www.sclc.org.uk.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The international law that states what rights children and young people have from birth until they reach 18 years of age. To find out more information on how the UNCRC affects your child and family relationships see www.unicef.org/crc.



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