

# TALKING TO YOUR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY



## PARENT PACKAGE 6 years old and younger



Sexual and Reproductive Health  
Education and Health Promotion

(403) 955-6515

[www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/sexualhealth](http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/sexualhealth)  
[www.teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca)

## THIS PACKAGE FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN 6 YEARS OLD & UNDER CONTAINS:

- ☺ Information for you on what parents need to know, such as:
  - the parent's role (pg. 3)
  - what sexuality is (pg. 3)
  - suggestions for what parents can do (pg. 4)
- ☺ Some questions you can ask yourself about what your family believes (pg. 5)
- ☺ Information about the normal stages of sexual development for preschool children (pg. 6-8)
- ☺ Tips and strategies for talking comfortably with your child about sexuality (pg. 9)
- ☺ What your children need to know and when they need to know it (pg. 10-11)
- ☺ Resource lists and links to gather more information (pg. 12-14)

**This information is a guideline only, as each child develops and asks questions at his/her own rate.**



**\*\*Choose the information that fits for you and your family values.\*\***

# PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

## The PARENT'S role...

Parents want to provide the guidance and knowledge their children need to become responsible and happy adults. Parents, however, are sometimes afraid of talking about sexuality with their children because:

- they are uncomfortable talking about reproductive body parts and functions. For many parents, the topic of sex was not discussed with adults when they were growing up.
- they wonder if talking about sexuality and reproduction will encourage their children to experiment. The fact is young people, whose parents discuss all aspects of sexuality with them, tend to delay becoming sexually active, when compared with youth whose parents do not discuss sexuality.
- they are not sure what children need to know at different ages.

As parents, you are already teaching your children many things about sexuality and have been since the day they were born. They learn from:

- the way they are touched by others;
- the way their bodies feel to them;
- what your family believes is okay and not okay to do;
- the words that family members use (and don't use) to refer to parts of the body;
- watching the relationships around them;
- who does what chores, and so on.

They are also picking up a great deal from outside the family whenever they watch television, listen to music, talk with their friends – just live in the world.

## What SEXUALITY is...

Sexuality is not just sexual intercourse or sexual activity. Sexuality has to do with:

- being female or male, and how females and males are alike and different in the way they look and act;
- how we view our bodies and our relationships with each other;
- how we grow and change over the years;
- who we are as women and men (girls and boys); and
- how we reproduce.

Sexuality (our feelings and behaviors) is an important part of being human and **healthy** sexuality is an important part of a person's overall health and well being.

## What PARENTS can do...

- ☺ Provide correct information. Studies show that young people tend to obtain most of their information (or misinformation) about sexuality from friends.
- ☺ Answer questions honestly. Tell your children what they want to know using words they can understand.
- ☺ Start conversations. Some children never ask about sexuality.
- ☺ Share your beliefs, concerns and values. Your children need to know where you stand.
- ☺ Help your children make good decisions and stand by their decisions.

Adapted from: 1. Association for Sexuality Education and Training (ASSET). (1993). *Sexuality begins at home* (Brochure). Oak Harbour, WA: Author. 2. Sex Education Coalition. (1992). *Tips for parents* (Brochure). Silver Spring, MD: Author.



The following page of information was adapted from: Sex Education Coalition (1992). *Tips for parents* (Brochure). Silver Spring, MD: Author.

# WHAT ARE YOUR FAMILY BELIEFS?

As a parent, you hope that your child will always make good choices that are based on the values that your family shares. An important part of discussing sexuality with your children is sharing with them what you believe. YOU are an extremely important person in your child's life. Ask yourself:

- Does your child actually know what you believe?
- Have you really discussed your values about sexuality as a family?

The following chart may provide you with some things to think and talk about as a family.

When you have a family discussion, remember to:

- Choose a quiet time when nobody is feeling rushed
- Treat each other with respect
- Really listen to each family member
- Be honest
- Share the reasons for the things you believe

## WHAT DOES YOUR FAMILY BELIEVE?

<p><b>Gender</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does it mean to be male/female?</li> <li>• How are males/females different? Alike?</li> <li>• How are males/females "supposed" to act?</li> <li>• Is there a double standard for males/females? Should there be?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Appearance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is attractive?</li> <li>• Do people have to be young to be attractive?</li> <li>• What messages do you give in the way you dress?</li> <li>• How do these messages affect your relationships with other people?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Relationships</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What makes a good relationship?</li> <li>• How are relationships different? (boyfriend, parent, child, business)</li> <li>• How should people show affection?</li> <li>• How can people resolve disagreements?</li> </ul>
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## WHAT DOES YOUR FAMILY BELIEVE?

<p><b>The Family</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What makes a family?</li> <li>• What rules does your family have about privacy?</li> <li>• What responsibilities does each family member have?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Sexual Communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What attitudes do people have about: talking about sexuality? sexual slang? physical affection?</li> <li>• Why do people often laugh and make jokes about sexuality?</li> <li>• What is sexual harassment?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Life Choices</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do people think about teens and: sexual behavior? abortion? contraception? homosexuality? choices in adulthood? (single, married, parenthood)</li> </ul>
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## WHAT DOES YOUR FAMILY BELIEVE?

# YOUR CHILDRENS' DEVELOPMENT

## Birth through 2 Years of Age

### Physical

- Very rapid period of growth.

### Sexual

- Children learn about love and trust through touching and holding. They become very responsive to physical touch and pick up nonverbal/verbal messages that begin to shape the child's understanding of their own sexuality.
- Through sex role conditioning, families encourage either a male or female identity (boys and girls are treated differently).
- Exploration of genitals and other body parts. Growing awareness of excretory functions and the messages from parents and others about these functions.
- Experiences awareness of genital pleasure. From birth, boys experience erections and girls lubricate vaginally.

### Developmental

- Need to establish trust and feel secure in their relationship to significant others. (e.g., parents, siblings, extended family members).
- The child develops an increased interest in the bodies of other people, particularly those in the same family. Feelings of curiosity and a desire to explore by touch.
- Family and other significant adults convey an attitude toward body parts, in particular, genitals. They can also build or discourage the development of trust, as well as the development of self-esteem in a child.

## 3 through 4 Years of Age

### Physical

- Slow and steady period of growth.

## **Sexual**

- Gender identity develops (child knows “I am a boy” or “I am a girl”).
- Body exploration with peers is common e.g. playing doctor.
- Child may touch own genitals for pleasure, unless taught not to.

## **Developmental**

- Child may wish for special relationship with opposite sex parent and compete with parent of the same sex. (e.g. “I’m going to marry you.”)
- Child more independent – sees him\herself as a separate person. Parental attitudes remain the primary source of child’s self esteem and sense of security.
- Imitation of adult behavior.
- Amused by excretory functions and will use language that parents and siblings use. Excellent time to learn about the parts of the body and its functions.
- Some curiosity about babies, pregnancy and the birth process.
- Use of obscenities and repetition of “curse” words.
- The focus of pleasurable sensations shifts from the oral area (e.g., Putting toys into their mouth) to the anal zone (e.g., Being curious about bodily functions); therefore, toilet training becomes a major event.

## **5 through 7 Years of Age**

### **Physical**

- Slow and steady growth continues.

### **Sexual**

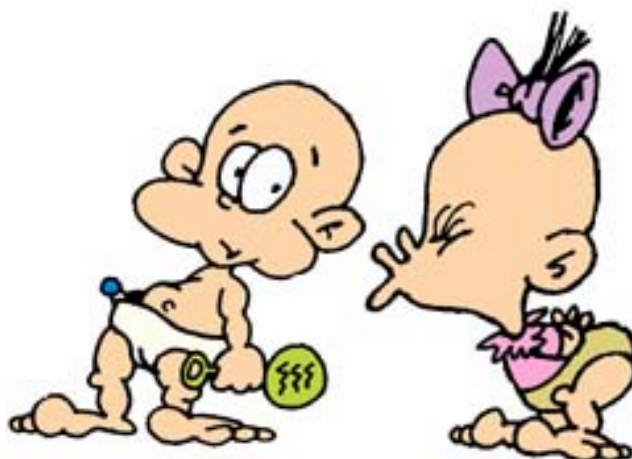
- Children are involved in the final stages of establishing a foundation of their gender identity. They explore adult roles by “reversal play”; e.g. playing house, but each child tries on a different role at certain times.

- Usually gives up wish for special relationship with opposite sex parent and seek a stronger relationship with same sex parent.
- Body exploration is common. Aware of sex differences and reproduction but may not be too interested.
- The media as well as family members influence their understanding of male and female roles within the family, which may or may not be typical.

### **Developmental**

- At this age, children often adopt some “bathroom vocabulary” (e.g., Enjoys rhymes about diarrhea). Due in part to influence of peers, there is a tendency to consider sexual terminology as “bad” words.
- Children often ask questions about pregnancy, birth and babies. They may ask of the father’s role in reproduction. Interest in comparing animal and human behavior.
- Begin to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.
- Becomes modest about own body. Beginning self-consciousness leads to a desire for privacy and feelings of embarrassment may be exhibited.
- Continuing development of gender identity shown by choice of leisure activities, ways in which feelings are expressed, and school subjects.

Source: Alberta Health. (1995). *Talking about sexuality with children.*



## TIPS FOR DISCUSSING SEXUALITY WITH YOUR CHILDREN

- ☺ Answer questions at the time that your child asks, don't put them off.
- ☺ Listen carefully to the question to make sure you understand what she/he is asking.
- ☺ Use 'teachable' moments to open discussion with a child who does not ask questions (e.g. commenting on the pregnancy of a friend or a relative may be a good introduction to the topic of pregnancy and how a baby grows in the uterus). Television programs, newspaper articles or books are other vehicles that can assist in initiating a discussion.
- ☺ Don't try to cover everything at once, but don't worry if you think you have said "too much". Your child will sift the information, or let it pass - perhaps catching a phrase here or there to ask you about later.
- ☺ Keep the language simple and age appropriate (e.g. a three-year-old may be satisfied with "babies grow in a special place inside the mother's body - called a uterus"). A six-year-old will likely have more questions about how the baby grows, and may want to know how it will come out.
- ☺ Use correct terms and recognize "body science". It is confusing for children to have cute names for some body parts and not others.
- ☺ Check out what they already know. Older children in school will inevitably hear comments or words that they don't understand. Show your willingness to discuss these by asking what they can tell you about a particular sexual topic. This encourages communication and can give you the opportunity to correct any misinformation that they have.
- ☺ Let your children know what you think, and what standards of behaviour are all right in your house. It is also important to let them know what is socially appropriate/inappropriate, and what to do if they have difficulties or questions. As children mature, it is important to help them understand that other people's standards may be different from theirs.
- ☺ Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know" or to let your child know that you're embarrassed. You can say "I feel a little uncomfortable, but this is important to talk about - let's find out some answers together."

# WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW... AND WHEN THEY NEED TO KNOW IT

## Children ages 2 to 4 (The Magical Thinkers) Need to Know Before They Start School:

- the names for genitals – penis, testicles, scrotum, anus, vulva, labia, vagina, clitoris, uterus, ovaries;
- that reproduction happens when a man's sperm joins a woman's ovum by sexual intercourse;
- that a baby grows in the uterus;
- that the baby is born through the vagina;
- the *basics* about menstrual periods and nocturnal emissions as clean and healthy processes; and
- not to pick up used condoms.



Preschoolers are the easiest age to teach. They have an abundance of natural curiosity and soak up everything they hear. At this age children will use their imaginations to make up a story if they have not had an explanation that they are able to understand. Babies found under cabbage patches or dropped off by storks are examples of magical thinking. Be prepared to tell the truth again and again (e.g. the penis goes into the vagina to deliver the sperm to the ovum). Preschoolers don't always understand a story the first time, or hear all of it. If you are silent on the topic of sex, it teaches children that it is something your family doesn't talk about and they will want to believe whatever story they hear from others. Give them the facts about their body parts, what they are used for, and how babies are made. These facts will help to protect them in the future from the possibility of being exploited or abused because they may be more likely to discuss sexual topics with people they trust.

## Children in Grades 1 to 3 (The Bathroom Humour Types) Need to Know:

- everything the preschooler needs to know, plus;
- the scientific words: urine, stool, bladder, urethra (tube draining the bladder);
- the difference between the digestive and reproductive systems;
- *full* information about menstrual periods and nocturnal emissions; and
- *basic* information about body changes at puberty.



At this age children often think that girls have one opening for “poop and pee”, and what girls eat goes into the same place as the baby grows. They need to know that **menstruation** is the time when a girl’s body begins to grow and practice for being grown-up. The uterus practices too by making a kind of “water bed” inside itself for the baby. The bed is made of water, soft skin, and a little bit of blood. Each month, when there isn’t a baby, the uterus changes the bed and the old one comes dripping out of the vagina. **Nocturnal emissions** happen when boys are eight or nine years old or older and their testicles begin to make sperm for practice. Some nights, when boys are fast asleep, the extra sperm come out of their penis. Only a spoonful of milky-white fluid is let out and often looks like a small wet spot on their pajamas. Menstruation and nocturnal emissions are private, of course, but not a secret.

Source: Hickling, M. (1996). *More speaking of sex*. Northstone Publishing: Kelowna, BC.

## FINDING RESOURCES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

This information is intended to assist you in finding agencies or organizations within your community that can help support you in raising a sexually healthy child. There are many different resources available, but it is important to choose the ones that follow your family's beliefs and values.

### Things to Think About

You may want to ask some questions to determine if an agency integrates a philosophy that provides a high quality of service and education that is appropriate for the age of your child, comprehensive, sensitive to your cultural beliefs and values, and respectful of individual choices and rights.

- What is the organization's philosophy and mission?
- What types of services do they offer?
- What type of training do the employees or volunteers receive?
- How are they funded and who are they accountable to?

### Agencies That Support Sexual Health and Education

- The **Sexual and Reproductive Health Program** of Alberta Health Services have an education team that provides inservices to parents, school and community groups, on many sexual health related topics. The education programs are provided free of charge. To arrange a program, or to request more information on a specific topic, call (403) 955-6515 or through [www.teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca)
- **Community Health Centers** have Public Health Nurses who are active within their communities and schools. They provide services, as well as information, counselling and referral regarding birth control, STIs, pregnancy options, and pregnancy and parenting. Some Health Centres may also have Sexual Health and STI clinics. A listing of Community Health Centers and services provided by the Alberta Health Services can be obtained by calling their information line at (403) 943-LINK (5465) or through the website at [www.albertahealthservices.ca](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca) Programs & Services/Calgary or [www.informAlberta.ca](http://www.informAlberta.ca)

- **Sexual Health Access Alberta:** offers services, information and counselling on sexual and reproductive health issues. To find a local affiliate near you go to [www.sexualhealthaccess.org](http://www.sexualhealthaccess.org) or in Calgary call (403) 283-8591.
- Your local schools provide sexual health teaching based on Alberta Learning's curriculum. The curriculum can be accessed through [www.learning.gov.ab.ca](http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca)
- Your local community health centre may have a **Community Services Directory** (often available through the library) which will list community organizations, health and social agencies.
- Your community may have a **Family and Community Support Service** (FCSS) that may be able to direct you to other local agencies/resources, or help to set up local partnerships that focus on prevention and enhance social and health well-being. To find out about your communities support services look at the blue pages of your local telephone directory.

## Webliography for Parents

Links to web resources are provided for information only and do not imply an endorsement of views, products, or services. Although our staff regularly reviews these links, we can't be certain that they are 100% credible since their content can be changed at any time.

### **Alberta Health Services** *(Canadian)*

[www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/sexualhealth](http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/sexualhealth) Information and pamphlets on a variety of sexual health topics and resources.

[www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/sexualhealth/questions/questionbox](http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/sexualhealth/questions/questionbox)

An on-line mailbox for your questions about sexual health topics. Answers are posted within 1-2 weeks.

### **Canadian Federation for Sexual Health** *(Canadian)*

[www.cfsh.ca](http://www.cfsh.ca)

Articles about talking with your child/teen about sex, links to many resources, and guidelines for finding credible web sites.

### **Teaching Sexual Health Website** *(Canadian)*

[www.teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca)

A sexual health website, based on Alberta Learning Curriculum, developed for classroom use by teachers. Includes sections for parents and students at all grade levels.

**Sexuality and U** *(Canadian)*

[www.sexualityandu.ca/parents/talk.aspx](http://www.sexualityandu.ca/parents/talk.aspx)

Information about puberty, talking about sex with your child, STI and contraception.

**Kids Health** *(USA)*

[www.kidshealth.org/parent/growth/index](http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/growth/index)

Articles on communication with your teen, puberty and surviving adolescence.

**I Wanna Know** *(USA)*

[www.iwannaknow.org/parents](http://www.iwannaknow.org/parents)

Information on being an “askable” parent, links to teen sites about puberty, STDs, abstinence, decision-making and condom use.

**Inner Learning Online** *(USA)*

[www.innerbody.com](http://www.innerbody.com)

Colorful anatomy pictures and text.

**PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)** *(Canadian)*

[www.pflag.ca](http://www.pflag.ca)

Information, resources and support for parents of lesbians and gays.



## Talking to Your Preschooler about Sexuality

Calgary Public Library has lots of great resources to help you talk to your preschool-aged child about sexuality.

[www.calgarypubliclibrary.com](http://www.calgarypubliclibrary.com)

### Books for Sharing

J 612.6 SAL *Amazing you: getting smart about your private parts*, by Gail Saltz (2005)

J 612.63 BUT *My mom's having a baby!* by Dori Hillestad Butler (2005)

J 612.6 ANN *Sex and babies: first facts*, by Jane Annunziata (2003)

J 612.6 ALL *Where Willy went: the big story of a little sperm!* by Nicholas Allan (2004)

J 612.64 BAT *Who has a belly button?* by Mary Batten (2004)

Z LUN *Tell me my story, Mama*, by Deb Lund (2004)

### For Parents

649.65 RIC *Everything you never wanted your kids to know about sex (but were afraid they'd ask): the secrets to surviving your child's sexual development from birth to the teens*, by Justin Richardson (2003)

J 612.6 BRO *What's the big secret? : talking about sex with girls and boys*, by Laurie Krasny Brown (1997)

DVD *Sex spelled out for parents. Program 2: preschoolers*, by the National Film Board 613.951 of Canada (1999)  
SEX disc 2

Internet: *Talking to Your Preschool Children about Sexuality* (Calgary Health Region)

<http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/hecomm/sexual/pdf/minus6years.pdf>

Internet: *What to Say When They Ask: Talking about Sexuality with your Child*, Alberta Health and Wellness,

<http://www.health.alberta.ca/public/sexuality.pdf>

*You will need a valid library card to borrow these resources.*

***Library memberships are the best deal in town!***

Children 12 years and under are free, teens (13 - 17 years) \$6, adults \$12, seniors \$9  
(If you are experiencing financial difficulty, registration fees can be waived. Please speak with staff).