

FACT SHEET

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PARENTS TALK TO THEIR CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY

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Children, as developing human beings, are curious about many aspects of their personal growth. One special area of interest to children of all ages is their sexuality.

Children who are reared on farms or in other settings where animals and nature are part of the everyday experience may learn about sexual functioning more readily than other children. However, all children are curious about their bodies.

Parents have much more knowledge, experience and understanding of sex-related matters. However, many parents feel uneasy and embarrassed when their children ask them about sexual functioning and sexual feelings. Parents can learn to feel more comfortable in discussing sexuality if they share their feelings and needs with other parents first. Reading sources may also help parents who wish to feel more knowledgeable and comfortable when talking to their children about sexuality.

A Healthy Framework: Sex Education as Education for Love

Eric Fromm, respected author and psychologist, has divided love in four basic parts:

- 1) *Labor*: One is willing to work for and give of one's self for those whom he or she loves.
- 2) *Responsibility*: One constantly evaluates the consequences of his or her behavior as it relates to others, and is prepared to help when needed by loved ones.
- 3) *Respect*: One refrains from exploitation of others; avoids interaction in which one benefits at the expense of the other.
- 4) *Understanding*: One tries to see himself in the place of another.

Within this framework of love, parents can talk best to their children about sexual functioning.

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Rather than just being taught the "facts of life," children need to learn about their own sexuality in terms of human love and relationships.

Parents who learn to share their feelings about sexuality in terms of human relationships may feel more successful and comfortable discussing sexuality with their children. Children learn about human sexuality by observing their parents or other relatives. Parents who model a loving relationship help to set the stage for the child's growing curiosity about his or her own sexuality. If parents feel comfortable in showing a loving marriage relationship, the child may feel secure asking questions about his or her own sexuality.

How do children learn about sexuality?

- From their parents, aunts, uncles and other close relatives.
- From friends in school and the neighborhood.
- From movies, television, records, magazines, books and other sources.
- From classes in school.

Many parents do not want their children to learn about sexuality in school or from outsiders. But these same parents may not feel comfortable talking with their children. Parents who wish to be responsible for



their children's understanding of sexuality can prepare themselves for this task.

Sharing knowledge and feelings about sexuality can bring the parent and child even closer together. The child may grow closer to his or her parent even more because the parent assumes this responsibility.

The Role of the Parent in Teaching Sexuality

- Be open to questions from your child.
- Be willing to share information you have on sexuality.
- Be honest and sincere; if you don't know an answer, tell the child you'll try to find out.
- Respect your child's curiosity and need to know.
- Read appropriate sources, and provide books for your child to read.
(A visit to the library should help!)

William Block, who has worked with parents and young people in the area of sex education, describes three ages of sexuality:

The Dormant Age (5 to 9 years) — This is a joyful, happy period of life. Children from 5 to 9 are free to play, make friends, cuddle pets, and just be themselves. Questions that might be asked during this period include:

"Why do fish lay eggs?"

"Where do puppies grow before they're born?"

"Why does my teenage sister lock her bedroom door?"

"Why am I a boy (or girl)?"

Answers should be simple, direct and to the point.

The Awakened Age (10 to 14 years) — This is the time in children's lives when they come alive. Children of this age have a heightened curiosity about their bodies and the physical changes that are occurring within them. Common questions include:

"How does a baby breathe in a mother's stomach?"

"How can I get rid of pimples?"

"Does a woman have to get married to have babies?"

Answers must be given with absolute, direct honesty. The more complete and honest you are at this time, the more respect, love and adherence to your guidelines of morality you will get in return.

The Active Period of Sexuality (15 to 19 years) — Children of this age are nearing adulthood rapidly. If their questions about sexuality have not been an-

swered adequately before this period, the task becomes more difficult at this point. Common questions include:

"Why can't I go steady?"

"I don't like girls. Is this okay?"

"How can I get an abortion?"

Answers should be brief, honest and unemotional. Teenagers from 15 to 19 are impatient and are looking for brief, relevant answers. They are more likely to respond to a detached approach than one which uses morality and attempts to instill guilt.

Summary

Parents can provide much of the information that their children need about human sexuality. Parents also provide a model for attitudes, values, feelings and ideas related to human sexuality.

Parents may build their own confidence in discussing sexuality by reading sources obtained at the public library, public health agencies, county Extension offices, family service agencies, physicians, ministers, counselors and others.

Educational Resources and Services Available

- Local libraries and educational facilities such as high schools, area community colleges, colleges and universities.
- Church programs which facilitate understanding of sexuality at all stages of human development.
- Texas Agricultural Extension Service — county and state offices have materials and programs on parent education.
- Mental health or family service agencies offer counseling services that include sex education counseling.

For Additional Information

Block, Dr. William A. *What Your Child Really Wants to Know About Sex — and Why*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972.

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Fromm, Eric. *The Art of Loving*, New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1963.

Educational programs conducted by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, handicap and national origin.

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