

# FACT SHEET

4-13-83  
L-2072  
new 5w

## PARENTS TALK TO THEIR YOUNG CHILD ABOUT SEXUALITY

Dolores Stegelin\*

Children begin to learn about their sexuality at an early age. Parents are usually the most important models for their children. Even infants begin to form ideas and attitudes about male and female roles from observations of how their parents behave or react in regard to sex-related matters.

Parents model for their young children in these ways:

- Parents show physical affection by hugging, holding hands and other displays of love.
- Parents react to their child's inquiries about sexuality, exploration of his or her own body or the understanding of differences between males and females.
- Parents reveal attitudes about sexual topics through their choices of TV programs, magazines, conversations and language usage.

### Are Young Children Ready to Learn about Sexuality?

Young children are often open and honest about their questions. This makes being the parent of a young child special! The young child displays these characteristics:

- A sense of autonomy and initiative — the young child constantly seeks to define himself or herself as a separate person.
- Natural curiosity — the young child seeks answers that help him or her to understand the world, including his or her own sexuality.
- Is open and accepting of information shared by the parents.
- Desires brief explanations rather than long, detailed ones.

- Models attitudes and behavior after his or her parents.

Children from infancy through age four show an increased awareness of their bodies and how they function. Parents can guide the child in his or her search for accurate and complete understanding of his or her sexuality.

### The Role of The Parent in Teaching Young Children about Sexuality

- Be knowledgeable about facts related to sexuality.
- Be open to your young child's questions.
- Be sensitive to your child's need to learn more about his or her body.
- Be positive and accepting of sexuality in children. Respect their right to be individuals.
- Be aware of "teachable moments" (babies nursing, pets giving birth) that provide natural settings for informing children about sexuality.
- Be open to outside sources that may facilitate discussions about sexuality with your child (library sources, magazines, publications for parents).



\*Extension family life education specialist, The Texas A&M University System.

### What Should the Young Child Know about Sex?

- The names and functions of the body parts including the sex organs and organs for eliminating waste from the body.
- The sexual differences and similarities between males and females.
- The feeling of "okay-ness" about their bodies and their sexuality.
- The importance of respecting other people's different attitudes and ideas regarding sexuality.
- The use of terminology that is acceptable to the family and in the presence of others.

### Some Tips for Parents of Young Children

Preschool children are moving through developmental stages that gradually increase their awareness of human sexuality. Therefore, parents need to exercise good judgment when answering their children's questions about sex-related matters.

- Very young children are curious about their bodies. Their questions are usually brief and straightforward.
- Parents should answer these questions completely but without too much detail.
- The preschooler may ask the same question over and over. This repetition is common and should be expected by parents.
- Children learn at their own pace.
- Parents should respond to questions in a simple, direct and honest fashion.
- Both parents should assume responsibility for teaching their children about sexuality.

In short, the very young child is already developing an awareness of his or her sexuality. Parents can facilitate the young child's growth by responding to their questions. Answers should be provided in a simple, honest and direct manner.

### Educational Services and Resources Available to Parents

- 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.
- Physicians and family doctors provide counseling as well as informational brochures.
- State Department of Health provides current information on sexual development.

### For Additional Information:

Block, William A. *What Your Child Really Wants to Know about Sex — and Why*. Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972.

Burt, John. *Education for Sexuality*. W. B. Saunders Co., 1970.

Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University. *Parents and Sex Education: Children and Teens*. Ronald S. Jones. Ames, Iowa: 1982.

Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. HFS228 *Sex Education for Your Young Child*. Bill Burk, 1979.

Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. HFS227 *Sex Education: An Opportunity for Parents*. Bill Burk, 1980.

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

Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, The Texas A&M University System and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating. Distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914.  
5M—3-83, New