

Helping Children Develop Healthy Sexual Behavior and Attitudes

by Fred Kaeser, Ed.D.,

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Introduction

After seeing two teenagers kissing passionately in a park, your five year-old son looks up and asks you, "Mommy, why are they sexing?" Or, your ten year-old daughter comes to you visibly upset and discloses to you that one of her fifth grade classmates said to her during recess, "You really make my _ _ _ _ (penis) hard." Or, you overhear one of your thirteen year-old daughter's friends telling her, "So-and-so is giving out _ _ _ _ (oral sex) to all the boys!" Or, you read in the newspaper that police showed up at a school because a third grade boy was caught touching and attempting to sodomize a female classmate. You can't help but be astounded by how much sexual awareness there is among young people today. Even if you think your own child is innocent and sheltered from sexual talk and experiences, you can't get over what you see and hear about what the "other" kids are doing.

Times have changed considerably. I've been involved in public school sex education for over twenty years, yet I am amazed at the significant numbers of children who express sexualized behaviors at younger and younger ages. As a whole, they seem to be genuinely more interested in sex, as if their curiosity about sex has been ratcheted up several notches. For parents, the days of postponing any discussion about intimate sex with your kids until they become teenagers are long gone. Today, if you haven't discussed the biological, psychological and moral implications of sexual relations with your kids by the time they've entered middle school, make a change quickly!

What factors influence the sexualization of children?

- 1 We live in a sexually potent environment. Before a child even reaches puberty, he or she has likely been exposed to thousands of sexual messages. Moreover, many of these messages are very explicit, sensational, violent, and lack any mention of the importance of emotional commitment in sexual relationships. We know that when children are exposed to excessive amounts of sexual stimuli, particularly at early ages when it can be confusing and incomprehensible, there is the potential for negative behaviors to follow.
- 2 Excessive exposure to sexual stimuli can result in sexualized bullies. Children who bully are also being bombarded by sexual stimuli. It makes sense that a percentage of these bullies will learn to incorporate sexual harm as part of their bullying tactics. This also raises the question, "Are we cultivating more sexual abusers and offenders as a result?" I have been particularly alarmed at the unusually high number of cases of young children who sexually hurt other children in our public schools. When we begin to see an inordinate number of elementary school children who act sexually aggressive, as I have from my position as Director of Health Services in a school district, red flags need to be raised.
- 3 Approximately 88,000 children were sexually abused in the United States in 2000. It is generally accepted that 1 in 4 females and 1 in 6 males will be sexually abused, assaulted, or raped before age 18. Many children who have been sexually abused will display

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problematic sexual behaviors. Although not a majority, many will also grow up to become abusers themselves.

- 4 A majority of parents do not communicate with their kids about sex, and when they do it is usually not enough. From an empirical standpoint, we know that many parents in the United States have difficulty speaking to their children about sexual issues. We also know that even when parents think they communicate well, their children frequently tell us it's not enough. Poor parent-child communication only hinders the child's ability to understand sexual matters. The good news is that when parents do communicate well, the results can be profound. In families where effective communication occurs, research shows children are less likely to experience intercourse, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted disease.

Talking to kids about sexual issues

As a parent, you routinely monitor and provide for your child's physical health. When your child has a fever you don't hesitate to take her temperature every couple of hours. Constant monitoring lets you know how she's feeling and whether or not things are getting better. As your child's sexual educator and counselor, you should utilize a similar approach. You need to check with your child on a regular basis about what she or he is seeing, hearing and wondering about sex. You also need to stay informed about what information the "experts" recommend you should discuss with your children at what ages, as well as be clear about what values and moral messages about sex you will impart to your kids.

Parents need to communicate the right type of information; not just the technical aspects of sexual behavior, but also the guidance necessary for managing peer pressure. The following topics should be part of the discussion.

Masturbation. You're either tolerant or against it. If you're tolerant, make sure that your child understands he/she has your permission to masturbate. More likely than not, your first opportunity to do this will be during a teachable moment - when you find your child stimulating his/her genitals which can be quite typical at about four, five, six years of age. Your response might be, "I see you rubbing your penis/vagina. Does that make you feel good? Mom/dad doesn't mind that you do this, but this is a private behavior that should only be done in your bedroom." The main goals are to give your permission (imparting your values), reinforce the understanding that it is a private behavior, and structure an appropriate way to engage in the behavior. If your child is around 5 or 6, don't be surprised if it takes awhile for him/her to learn the privacy concept. Accomplishing the developmental task of sexual modesty doesn't happen overnight. If your personal or religious beliefs cause you to be against masturbation, think about going easy on your child when you see him or her engage in it. Remember, virtually all kids are going to masturbate whether or not we agree with it. Rejection of this behavior can set the stage for feelings of wrongdoing and guilt. And the feelings of guilt, particularly if they result from

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religious sanction, can be overwhelming. But if you must say no, try something like, "When I see you masturbate it makes me feel uncomfortable. Our religion tells us we shouldn't do this. I know it feels good when you do it. I can't make you stop, but I hope you'll try." If you're unsure about what is appropriate and are having trouble making up your mind about masturbation, take a trip to the library and learn more about it.

Sexual intercourse and making babies. Most kids up to 8 years of age are content with knowing that a sperm cell from a man, together with an egg cell from a woman, combine to produce new life. Don't worry that they may not have the ability to fully understand the concept of cells, as long as you lay a foundation based on truth. Define a uterus, penis, testicles, and provide a base explanation of sperm and egg, and for the most part young children will accept this in a matter-of-fact way.

Some time after the age of 8, children begin to want to know how sperm meet the egg. This is not to say that younger kids won't ask about this also. Irrespective of whether the child is 6, 7, or 8 years old, there's still basically only one main answer. "The man puts his penis into the woman's vagina, and sperm from his testicles come out." This is also a good time to share your values about this behavior. One might say, "Only adults who love each other very much would do this." Additionally, around the age of 8 or 9, parents can introduce the concept that sexual intercourse can happen for reasons other than making babies. "Adults can also have sex to show that they love each other very much." Feel free to add more factual detail if your child requires it, but do not get into positions, orgasm, etc. They don't need to hear this yet.

Parents must also be alert and knowledgeable about the different ways babies are made. Questions about "test tube" babies or how same-sex partners can be parents may be asked, and parents should be informed enough to provide clear explanations. Periodic discussions about gay or lesbian relationships will go a long way in building tolerance and understanding among children. Parents need to understand that measured discussions about sexual intimacy with our children are necessary. While we need to determine at what age we'll initiate talks about intercourse with our kids, our talks should be in incremental steps. Try to give your child what you think he or she needs at the present time and build from there, piece by piece. But you do need to plan this out in your mind ahead of time.

Oral sex. Oral sex is indeed sex, and our teens need to know this. Although there is scant empirical research on the subject, from an anecdotal standpoint it appears that oral sex is growing in popularity among today's teenagers. I hear about it from kids in our middle schools as well as concerned colleagues. Generally, it is not necessary to address this with kids younger than 10 unless they bring it up. However several years ago, some parents had approached me at school and said their 7 year-old children were wondering about "that lady who kissed the President's private parts." They appeared stunned and unsure what to do. My advice to them was to acknowledge their questions and say something to the effect of, "I've heard about this too on

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television. As unusual as it might seem, some adults who love each other will do that. We don't talk about this publicly, but I am glad you came to me to ask about it."

For children 10 years and older, this topic should be discussed with respect to its meaning as a significant act of love and commitment. Misinformation must always be addressed. Teens have said "It's not really sex; you can't get pregnant and you can't get HIV." "No, you can't get pregnant, but the other two? Think again."

Love, empathy, respect, trust and commitment. The single most important thing you can do when discussing sex with your child is to incorporate these values into your discussions. When talking with young primary grade elementary school age children about babies, include information about the emotional components of making babies; that would-be parents share very strong, loving feelings and a commitment to each other before having a child. Older elementary school age children may ask about whether mom and dad have sex, and this is a good time to talk about your love for each other and the joint decision to have a baby as an expression of that love. "Two adults should never have sex unless they have love for each other." By the time 5th grade rolls around, any discussion about sex with your child should include concrete examples, whenever possible, about a couple's emotional commitment as a prerequisite to having sex. Take advantage of everyday teaching opportunities. If you're watching a soap opera, and 15 minutes after 2 people have met they're falling all over each other on a couch, tell your 9-year old "You know, I disapprove of their behavior, it doesn't make sense. They don't even know each other, so how do they know they love each other yet? Then continue on with a discussion about the true meaning of love and how relationships and commitment evolve. Learning about these qualities, what they mean, what they represent and how to recognize them takes considerable time and effort in working on relationships with different people, even over one's lifetime.

Sexual abuse prevention. Due to factors such as the earlier age at which children become interested in sex and the incidence of sexual abuse, education about appropriate sexual behaviors and boundaries becomes even more important. Prevention of sexual abuse should be done proactively, as part of a larger discussion about such topics as body parts and the boundaries of what is private and what is public. Like learning to cross the street, a child's ability to generalize what he or she learns about abuse prevention to real-life situations will probably take time. As a result, parents should discuss prevention strategies periodically with their kids and should tailor the discussion to fit the age of the child. In addition to discussing how adults can sexually abuse kids, it is equally important to talk with children about kids can abuse other kids. When speaking to 6-year-olds it's helpful to tell them "Sometimes other kids will try to touch your private parts. Sometimes they do it because they're trying to get attention, sometimes to bug you, or sometimes they don't understand that it makes you feel uncomfortable." By 5th grade, continuing with the discussion about how adults and other kids can abuse, begin to weave in an understanding of sexual harassment and taking violence.

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Middle schools are awash in all types of harassment. Boys harass girls, girls harass boys, boys harass boys, and girls harass girls. There is also significant harassment of gay, lesbian and transgender students. The adult message is simple: "There is no place for any behavior, words or actions that are unwelcome or unwanted by others. If you're not sure how something you do towards another will be taken, don't do it!" So if your 10-year-daughter tells you about a lewd or sexually inappropriate comment that a classmate said to her, tell her, "I'm glad you told me. We're going to make sure this doesn't go any further. I'll speak with the principal. This boy needs to understand that his words were hurtful and wrong."

Putting it all together

Parents are their children's role models, and they learn respect, trust, and emotional commitment within the family. Parents can and should be the most influential source in their children's lives in regard to how they behave sexually and socially. Unfortunately, too often it's the media and peers that are the influential sources. Think about all the different sexual messages children are exposed to on a daily basis - nearly naked pictures in magazines, sexual images on the internet or in a movie, sex talk among friends and peers, observing how peer and adults express their sexuality, the sexy billboard on the side of a building. Sexual messages are everywhere and our children are exposed to them on a daily basis. Now picture your child sitting at a table. For every sexual message he or she is exposed to, a one-by-one inch block is placed end to end on the table in front of him or her until the blocks reach the end of the table. A second row of blocks is then started on top of the first, and then a third row on top of the second, and so on until a wall is created. With every exposure to a sexual message the wall grows higher and higher. By the time children reach puberty the wall will extend incredibly high. Parents need to help their children understand and make sense of this wall.

Parents should provide a solid foundation of information and values regarding sexual behavior and attitudes. Children will then be better equipped for managing the constant stream of unsolicited content to which they are exposed from media and peers.

Although you can't always monitor what your kids will see, hear and do, you can take proactive steps by speaking and communicating with them on a regular basis. How do we do this? Look your children in the eyes, tell them that you love them, open your mouth and begin talking.

About the Author

Fred Kaeser, Ed.D. is the Director of Health Services for Community School District Two, NYC. Dr. Kaeser received his doctoral degree in Human Sexuality Studies from New York University and has taught sex education for over twenty years.

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