

## **The Buzz on the Birds and Bees** *Keeping Kids Informed and Innocent*

By Melanie J. Davis, M.Ed.

Parents often have two questions about sex education: “How much is enough?” and “How much is too much?”

Children have access to myriad sources of sexually oriented information, including magazine covers; TV shows and commercials; movies (even those rated for young teens); internet sites and spaces; and peers. Trying to prevent all exposure to these messages is next to impossible.

Unfortunately, the messages often imply that sex is either a trivial pursuit or a deadly encounter. Rarely do they present sexuality as a natural part of being human or present sexual activity can be pleasurable and affirming, in appropriate circumstances.

About two-thirds of parents have talked with their children about sexuality, but they often feel uncomfortable doing it.\* One reason for this discomfort is the fear that children who have too much information will lose their innocence and/or will become sexually precocious.

The concept of the innocent child dates to the late eighteenth century. According to art historian Anne Higonnet, adults believed in the Romantic Child, who was socially, sexually and psychically innocent. Children were to be protected from everything related to sexuality, including their own self-pleasure. In the late twentieth century, another figure emerged, that of the Knowing Child. This child was innocent yet was also recognized as having a sensual body and complex emotions. In this regard, sensual means that children were recognized as being capable of taking pleasure in their bodies and senses.

Whether you view children as romantic or knowing can affect whether and how you discuss sexuality with them. It's natural to want to protect children's innocence when sexual messages are not in sync with your values; however, it is important to realize that despite your best intentions, your children will be exposed to information that may make you uneasy.

### **8 Tips for Setting a Healthy Sexual Framework**

If you discuss sexuality within a framework of values, you can help your Knowing Child keep sexual messages in perspective, separating fact from fiction. By keeping your child informed, you may help your child retain a sense of innocence by having the ability to distinguish between behaviors your child deems appropriate or inappropriate. This is not wishful thinking – time and again,

research has shown that children who are more informed about sexuality will delay sexual activity and, when they choose to engage in it, will practice safer sex. The following tips will help you establish a healthy framework for conversations:

1. Identify the sources of sexually oriented messages in your child's life, including siblings, caregivers, peers, media, yourself, etc.
2. Evaluate how those messages may be in keeping with or at odds with your values.
3. Brainstorm how you might mediate any concerns.
4. Talk with parents of your child's peers to get their take on what messages they believe are reaching their children. What video games are popular? Are their children using MySpace or Facebook? Are they browsing the internet unsupervised? Are parents hearing rumors about students who are pairing up and/or being sexually active?
5. Without mentioning names, ask your child if the adults' perceptions are accurate. Keep the conversation light and short; avoid sounding judgmental.
6. Let your child know you're interested in talking about issues relating to sexuality; invite your child to share information and ask questions.
7. Answer all of your child's questions about sexuality in an age-appropriate way; avoid saying "Wait until you're older," which cuts off conversations.
8. Keep an ear out as your child grows and associates with new classmates and friends.

\* As reported by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the US

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