

The Buzz on the Birds and Bees

Young Adults' Sex Ed Advice for Parents

By Melanie J. Davis, M.Ed.

Parents frequently ask, "When should I talk to my child about sex, and what should I say?" These are important questions, and the advice that we columnists and authors* provide often boils down to three main tips: start the conversations early, talk about more than human reproduction, and listen to what your kids have to say.

The last tip is often the hardest. If you haven't established a habit of conversing with your child about areas related to sexuality, your child is unlikely to say much for you to listen to. Or, your child may talk about crushes and age-related physical changes with ease but be too embarrassed to ask whether masturbation is harmful or healthy.

This month, I'm offering parents the benefit of insights provided by students who took my Human Sexuality courses in two New York and Pennsylvania colleges this year. Through discussions, journals, essays and anonymous question cards, these young adults shared what their parents taught them—or failed to teach them—about sex. The common denominator among them and the younger teens and adolescents with whom I've worked is that they have experienced unnecessary worry, embarrassment and shame because their parents avoided talking about sexuality.

Some students experimented sexually to find answers on their own. Some have serious problems trusting people because they were emotionally betrayed. Others were sexually harassed, molested, shunned for coming out as gay or lesbian, or abused emotionally and physically by boyfriends/girlfriends. Fortunately, many have also had the joy of respectful, safe, emotionally enriching relationships. They have grown into wonderful young adults, but nearly all of them say they could have reached this point more comfortably had they been able to speak openly with their parents about sexuality.

To give you an insiders' view, I asked my students for tips they would offer parents for talking to children about sexuality. Here are their suggestions:

- Don't worry about talking too much about sex. We're going to have sex, and we need to know how to do it safely.
- Never talk about your own sex life. No one wants to hear about their parents' sex life.
- Never talk about sexual techniques because that's just creepy.
- Talk about what makes a good boyfriend/girlfriend – the qualities that make people want to be with you.
- Surprises are bad, especially when puberty hits. Tell kids early on what to expect.
- Keep an open mind. Don't assume that if you're straight (heterosexual), your child is.
- Don't lecture.
- Avoid making judgmental statements. Stay calm.
- Offer to pay for prescription contraceptives because they're really expensive. Check whether your insurance will cover them.
- Talk about your values so your child knows where your attitudes about sex come from.
- We talk more with friends and can find out anything we want on the internet, so your information about sex and health may be out of date.
- Talk about what you learned from bad relationships so we don't make the same mistakes.
- If we bring home a person you can't stand, don't say so.

The students' comments make a lot of sense. The only thing I would add is that no one, of any age, has told me their parents said too much about sex or said it too soon. That says it all.

*My workbook, "Sexuality Talking Points: A guide toward thoughtful conversations between parents and children" is available online at http://www.honestexchange.com/Public/Pu_Products.htm

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