

Tips for Talking About Sexuality:

Many parents of children with developmental disabilities need help talking about sexuality. Here are some general tips for talking about this sensitive topic.

You may have to initiate

Many children won't ask questions, so you may need to be the one to bring it up. This can be done by saying, "Now that you're growing up, I want to talk with you about body changes," or, "Some people have many questions about sexuality, like how are babies made? Or will I ever find a partner? Or what is a condom? What questions do you have about these topics?"



*Myth:
People with
disabilities
are not
interested in
sex*

Give age appropriate information

It's important to talk with your child about the sexuality topics for their actual, biological age, not their cognitive age. For example, when a girl is 11 years old, it's important that she learns about body changes to prepare her for puberty, even if her "cognitive" age is 5. The trick is finding ways to teach abstract concepts in ways that your child can understand.

Take advantage of "teachable moments"

The best way to start a discussion is to take advantage of "teachable moments," those everyday events that provide a perfect opening. If someone in your neighborhood is pregnant, talk with your child about it. If you're with your child watching a television show or listening to music in the car, figure out if the contents might spark a conversation about sexuality.

Simplify your responses

When answering your child's questions, less is more. Begin with the simplest explanation and move to a more complicated one if your child continues to be interested or ask questions.

Be patient

Concepts will need to be covered more than once. Skills will probably not be learned after one discussion or practice session. Expect children to ask the same questions again and again. Find ways to be concrete when teaching the topic. Use anatomically correct dolls, three-dimensional models, drawings, photographs, and videos.



Try to give a consistent message

It can be confusing for children with developmental disabilities when their parents give one message and a provider gives another message. Work closely with the people in your child's life to establish and give consistent, positive messages about sexuality.

Try not to react

If your child is doing something inappropriate or asks a shocking question, try not to react. Try to remain calm. Respond to the behavior, by naming it and telling them what is appropriate to do. Answer the question in a matter-of-fact way. How you respond sends a message about sexuality and tells your child whether you are an "askable" parent.

Provide for practice in a safe setting

Some skills may be easy to break down into smaller steps, while others will present a greater challenge. For example, it may be fairly easy to teach a young adult how to use a condom correctly, but it may be much harder teaching a young adult how to ask a partner to use a condom and what to do if the partner refuses. Role playing is a method for practicing these skills-- you pretend you're the partner, and your child brings up using condoms. It gives them practice at responding to their partner's reactions.

There's nothing wrong with being embarrassed, and there's nothing wrong with telling your children that you're embarrassed. This helps to make it clear to your child that the embarrassment belongs to you and not to them or the topic. You may even explain that your parents didn't talk with you much, if that is the case, and that's why you feel embarrassed.

Let a book say the embarrassing stuff

That way, you and your child are a team, confronting and reacting to all of the embarrassing things being said in the book.

You don't need to know the answer to every question

If you don't know an answer, you and your child can hunt for it together. Make use of local resources -- libraries, doctors, nurses, Planned Parenthood Health Centers, etc.



Myth:

Children with disabilities will not grow up to marry and have families

If you're thrown by a question, you have the right to answer it later

Sometimes children pose questions that we'd like to answer, but we may be so taken aback that we don't know quite how to respond. It's perfectly okay to say, "I'd like to answer that question, but first I need to think about what I want to say." Just make sure you answer the question later.

You have the right to pass on personal questions

One way to help children develop their own privacy standards is for them to see that you also have your limits.

Watch your body language

Your words and body language should be giving the same messages. Don't grimace when you're saying, "What a great question!"

Each time you respond in a way that helps your child learn concretely and positively, it will get easier for you

Try imagining the hardest question your child could throw your way and practice answering it. Let your children "overhear" conversations. Your child may be too embarrassed to discuss sexual topics, but they may not mind hearing a discussion about the topic.

Ask your child for their opinion

Their self-respect begins with the consideration they receive from others.

Have a back-up person for your child

Ideally, we want our kids to talk with us, but they may be uncomfortable and need another option. Find someone that has similar values to yours that your child can go to if they have a question or a concern.

These tips will help you have successful conversations with your child about sexuality. And remember, these conversations are not one-time-only talks. Keeping the lines of communication open will help your child learn, and will help you feel more comfortable talking.

Katherine McLaughlin, M.Ed. is a national expert and trains individuals, staff, and parents on sexuality and developmental disabilities. She teaches sexuality education to people with developmental disabilities and trains them to be peer sexuality educators. She is the author of an agency and school curriculum, "Sexuality Education for People with Developmental Disabilities." She has developed two online courses: "Developmental Disability and Sexuality 101" for professionals and "Talking to Your Kids: Developmental Disabilities and Sexuality" for parents. She has spent her career trying to elevate the status of all people, which is why the name of her growing company is Elevatus Training.