

Are You an Askable Parent?

As a parent or caregiver, it is very important for you to be *askable*. What does that mean? How do adults become *askable*?

To be *askable* means that young people see you as approachable and open to questions. Being *askable* about sexuality is something that most parents and caregivers want but that many find very difficult. Adults may have received little or no information about sex when they were children. Sex may not have been discussed in their childhood home, whether from fear or out of embarrassment. Or, adults may worry about:

- Not knowing the *right* words or the *right* answers;
- Being *out of it* in the eyes of their young people;
- Giving too much or too little information; or
- Giving information at the wrong time.

Being *askable* is important. Research shows that youth with the least accurate information about sexuality and sexual risk behaviors may experiment more and at earlier ages compared to youth who have more information.^{1,2,3,4,5} Research also shows that, when teens are able to talk with a parent or other significant adult about sex and about protection, they are less likely to engage in early and/or unprotected sexual intercourse than are teens who haven't talked with a trusted adult.^{6,7,8,9} Finally, youth often say that they want to discuss sex, relationships, and sexual health with their parents—parents are their preferred source of information on these subjects.^{10,11}

Because being *askable* is so important and because so many adults have difficulty initiating discussions about sex with their children, adults may need to learn new skills and become more confident about their ability to discuss sexuality. Here are some tips from experts in the field of sex education.

Talking with Young People about Sexuality

- 1. Acquire a broad foundation of factual information from reliable sources.** Remember that sexuality is a much larger topic than sexual intercourse. It includes biology and gender, of course, but it also includes emotions, intimacy, caring, sharing, and loving, attitudes, flirtation, and sexual orientation as well as reproduction and sexual intercourse.
- 2. Learn and use the correct terms for body parts and functions.** If you have difficulty saying some words without embarrassment, practice saying these words, in private and with a mirror, until you are as comfortable with them as with non-sexual words. For example, you want to be able to say “penis” as easily as you say “elbow.”
- 3. Think through your own feelings and values about love and sex.** Include your childhood memories, your first infatuation, your values, and how you feel about current sex-related issues, such as contraceptives, reproductive rights, and equality with regard to sex, gender, and sexual orientation. You must be aware of how you feel before you can effectively talk with youth.
- 4. Talk *with* your child.** Listen more than you speak. Make sure you and your child have open, *two-way* communication—as it forms the basis for a positive relationship between you and your child. Only by listening to each other can you understand one another, especially regarding love and sexuality, for adults and youth often perceive these things differently.
- 5. Don't worry about—**
 - Being “with it.” Youth have that with their peers. From you, they want to know what you believe, who you are, and how you feel.
 - Being embarrassed. Your kids will feel embarrassed, too. That's okay, because love and many aspects of sexuality, including sexual intercourse, are highly personal. Young people understand this.

- Deciding which parent should have this talk. Any loving parent or caregiver can be an effective sex educator for his/her children.
- Missing some of the answers. It's fine to say that you don't know. Just follow up by offering to find the answer or to work with your child to find the answer. Then do so.

Talking with Young Children

- 1. Remember that if someone is old enough to ask, she/he is old enough to hear the correct answer and to learn the correct word(s).**
- 2. Be sure you understand what a young child is asking.** Check back. For example, you might say, "I'm not certain that I understand exactly what you are asking. Are you asking if it's okay to do this or why people do this?" What you don't want is to launch into a long explanation that doesn't answer the child's question.
- 3. Answer the question when it is asked.** It is usually better to risk embarrassing a few adults (at the supermarket, for example) than to embarrass your child or to waste a teachable moment. Besides, your child would usually prefer it if you answer right then and softly. If you cannot answer at the time, assure the child that you are glad he/she asked and set a time when you will answer fully. "I'm glad you asked that. Let's talk about it on the way home."
- 4. Answer slightly above the level you think your child will understand,** both because you may be underestimating him/her and because it will create an opening for future questions. But, don't forget that you are talking with a young child. For example, when asked about the differences between boys and girls, don't get out a textbook and show drawings of the reproductive organs. A young child wants to know what is on the *outside*. So, simply say, "A boy has a penis, and a girl has a vulva."
- 5. Remember that, even with young children, you must set limits.** You can refuse to answer personal questions. "What happens between your father and me is personal, and I don't talk about it with anyone else." Also, make sure your child understands the difference between values and standards relating to his/her question. For example, if a child asks whether it is bad to masturbate, you could say, "Masturbation is not bad; however, we never masturbate in public. It is a *private* behavior." [values *versus* standards] You should also warn your child that other adults may have different *values* about this subject while they will hold to the same *standard*; that is, they may believe it is wrong and a private behavior.

Talking with Teens

- 1. Recall how you felt when you were a teen.** Remember that adolescence is a difficult time. One moment, a teen is striving for separate identity and independence, and the next moment urgently needs an adult's support.
- 2. Remember that teens want mutually respectful conversations.** Avoid dictating. Share your feelings, values, and attitudes *and* listen to and learn about theirs. Remember that you cannot dictate anyone else's feelings, attitudes, or values.
- 3. Don't assume that a teen is sexually experienced or inexperienced, knowledgeable or naive.** Listen carefully to what your teen is saying and/or asking. Respond to the teen's actual or tacit question, not to your own fears or worries.
- 4. Don't underestimate your teen's ability to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of various options.** Teens have values, and they are capable of making mature, responsible decisions, especially when they have all the needed facts and the opportunity to discuss options with a supportive adult. If you give your teen misinformation she/he may lose trust in you, just as he/she will trust you if you are a consistent source of clear and accurate information. Of course, a teen's decisions may be different from ones you would make; but that goes with the territory.

Being *askable* is a lifelong component of relationships. It opens doors to closer relationships and to family connections. It's never too late to begin!

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