

# TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY



**PARENT PACKAGE**  
7 to 12 years old

## THIS PACKAGE FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN 7 TO 12 YEARS OLD CONTAINS:

- ☺ Information for you on what parents need to know, such as:
  - the parent's role (pg. 3)
  - what sexuality is (pg. 3)
  - the facts about sexual health education (pg. 4)
  - suggestions for what parents can do (pg. 5)
- ☺ Some questions you can ask yourself about your family beliefs. (pg. 6)
- ☺ Information about the normal stages of sexual development for children. (pg. 7-8)
- ☺ Tips and strategies for talking comfortably with your child about sexuality. (pg.9)
- ☺ What your children need to know and when they need to know it. (pg. 10-11)
- ☺ Resource lists and links to gather more information. (pg. 12-14)

**This information is a guideline only, as each child develops and asks questions at his/her own rate.**

**\*\*Choose the information that fits for you and your family values.\*\***



# WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

## The PARENT'S role...

Parents want to provide the guidance and knowledge their teens need to become responsible and happy adults. Parents, however, are sometimes afraid of talking about sexuality with their children because:

- they are uncomfortable talking about reproductive body parts and functions. For many parents, the topic of sex was not discussed with adults when they were growing up.
- they wonder if talking about sexuality and reproduction will encourage their teens to experiment. The fact is, young people, whose parents discuss all aspects of sexuality with them, tend to delay becoming sexually active, when compared with youth whose parents do not discuss sexuality.
- they are not sure what their teen children already know or need to know .

As parents, you are already teaching your teens many things about sexuality and have been since the day they were born. They learn from:

- the way they are touched by others;
- the way their bodies feel to them;
- what your family believes is okay and not okay to do;
- the words that family members use (and don't use) to refer to parts of the body;
- watching the relationships around them;
- who does what chores, and so on.

They are also picking up a great deal from outside the family whenever they watch television, listen to music, talk with their friends – just live in the world.

## What SEXUALITY is...

Sexuality is not just sexual intercourse or sexual activity. Sexuality has to do with:

- being female or male, and how females and males are alike and different in the way they look and act;
- how we view our bodies and our relationships with each other;
- how we grow and change over the years;
- who we are as women and men (girls and boys); and
- how we reproduce.

Sexuality (our feelings and behaviors) is an important part of being human and **healthy** sexuality is an important part of a person's overall health and well being. **Sexual Health Education** is key to providing children and youth with the knowledge and skills the need to ensure healthy sexual development.

## Some FACTS about Sexual Health Education...

- 📖 In 2000 a national survey revealed that nearly half of Canadian youth aged 15-19 are sexually active.<sup>1</sup>
- 📖 In Canada it is estimated that 7.1% of males and 5.5% of females aged 15 to 24 experience their first sexual intercourse before the age of 15.<sup>2</sup>
- 📖 Canadian youth have stated that friends, siblings, and media sources are the most common sources of sexual health information.<sup>3</sup>
- 📖 In a 2000 survey of Albertans, 88% believed that more prevention messages were needed to prevent further spread of HIV.<sup>4</sup>
- 📖 In the Calgary Region (1999), 82% of parents with children aged 2-9 and 90% of parents with children aged 10-17, reported occasionally or often talking with their children about relationships and sexuality.<sup>5</sup>
- 📖 In a series of surveys of Canadians, 85% of parents and 89% of adolescents agreed that sexual health education should be provided in the schools.<sup>6</sup>
- 📖 In the Netherlands (one of the countries with the lowest teen pregnancy rates), strategies that have helped reduce teen pregnancy include sexuality education, open discussion of human sexuality in the mass media, easier access to contraceptives, education programs and active participation of parents and teens in such programs.<sup>7</sup>
- 📖 Evaluations of comprehensive sexual health education programs reveal that they result in postponement of first sexual intercourse, decreases in the number of partners, and significant increases in condom use.<sup>8</sup>
- 📖 Sexual Health Education is based on a hierarchy of preferred sexual behavior. Abstinence from sexual activity for teenagers is preferred because it is the only method that ensures freedom from negative sexual health consequences. Postponement of initial sexual activity, adherence to one sexual partner and protected sexual intercourse are sequentially offered as the next best alternatives.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bibby, R. (2001). Canada's Teens: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow.

<sup>2</sup> CRHA (1998). Health of the Calgary Region, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> Canadian Journal of Public Health (Jan-Feb, 2001). Completing the Picture: Adolescents Talk About What's Missing in Sexual Health Services.

<sup>4</sup> AB Health and Wellness (2000). HIV/Hepatitis C Issues in AB: The 2000 Survey of Adults, pp. 18, 20.

<sup>5</sup> CRHA Population Health (1998). Parents Survey.

<sup>6</sup> SIECCAN Resource Document (1998). Common Questions about Sexual Health Education (cited from 1996 Canadian studies).

<sup>7</sup> Health Reports (Winter, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Health Canada (April 1998). STD Epi Update-Oral contraceptive and Condom Use. Online: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpb/lcdc/bah/epi/std511\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpb/lcdc/bah/epi/std511_e.html)

<sup>9</sup> CRHA Policy Position (1996). Overview of Services, Education, p. A-10-1.

## What PARENTS can do...

- ☺ Provide correct information. Studies show that young people tend to obtain most of their information (or misinformation) about sexuality from friends.

- ☺ Answer questions honestly. Tell your children what they want to know using words they can understand. If you do not know the answer try looking it up together.
- ☺ Start conversations. Some children never ask about sexuality.
- ☺ Share your beliefs, concerns and values. Your children need to know where you stand.
- ☺ Help your children make good decisions and stand by their decisions.
- ☺ Become familiar with the sexual health curriculum at your children's school and build on those topics.

Adapted from: 1. Association for Sexuality Education and Training (ASSET). (1993). *Sexuality begins at home* (Brochure). Oak Harbour, WA: Author. 2. Sex Education Coalition. (1992). *Tips for parents* (Brochure). Silver Spring, MD: Author.



The following page of information was adapted from: Sex Education Coalition (1992). *Tips for parents* (Brochure). Silver Spring, MD: Author.

# WHAT ARE YOUR FAMILY BELIEFS?

As a parent, you hope that your child will always make good choices that are based on the values that your family shares. An important part of discussing sexuality with your children is sharing with them what you believe. YOU are an extremely important person in your child's life. Ask yourself:

- Does your child actually know what you believe?
- Have you really discussed your values about sexuality as a family?

The following chart may provide you with some things to think and talk about as a family.

When you have a family discussion, remember to:

- Choose a quiet time when nobody is feeling rushed
- Treat each other with respect
- Really listen to each family member
- Be honest
- Share the reasons for the things you believe

<b>WHAT DOES YOUR FAMILY BELIEVE?</b>		
<b>Gender</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does it mean to be male/female?</li> <li>• How are males/females different? Alike?</li> <li>• How are males/females "supposed" to act?</li> <li>• Is there a double standard for males/females? Should there be?</li> </ul>	<b>Appearance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is attractive?</li> <li>• Do people have to be young to be attractive?</li> <li>• What messages do you give in the way you dress?</li> <li>• How do these messages affect your relationships with other people?</li> </ul>	<b>Relationships</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What makes a good relationship?</li> <li>• How are relationships different? (boyfriend, parent, child, business)</li> <li>• How should people show affection?</li> <li>• How can people resolve disagreements?</li> </ul>
<b>WHAT DOES YOUR FAMILY BELIEVE?</b>		
<b>The Family</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What makes a family?</li> <li>• What rules does your family have about privacy?</li> <li>• What responsibilities does each family member have?</li> </ul>	<b>Sexual Communication</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What attitudes do people have about: talking about sexuality? sexual slang? physical affection?</li> <li>• Why do people often laugh and make jokes about sexuality?</li> <li>• What is sexual harassment?</li> </ul>	<b>Life Choices</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do people think about teens and: sexual behavior? abortion? contraception? homosexuality? choices in adulthood? (single, married, parenthood)</li> </ul>

# YOUR CHILDRENS' DEVELOPMENT

## 5 Through 7 Years of Age

### Physical

- Slow and steady growth continues.

### Sexual

- Children are involved in the final stages of establishing a foundation for their gender identity. They explore adult roles with “reversal play”, e.g. acting out the role of the opposite sex while playing house.
- Usually gives up wish for special relationship with opposite sex parent and seek a stronger relationship with the same sex parent.
- Body exploration is common. Aware of sex differences and reproduction but may not be too interested.
- The media as well as family members influence their understanding of male and female roles within the family.

### Developmental

- At this age, children often adopt some “bathroom vocabulary” – think of all the rhymes about diarrhea! Due in part to the influence of peers, there is a tendency to think of sexual terminology as “bad” words.
- Children often ask questions about pregnancy, birth and babies. They may ask about the father’s role in reproduction and show an interest in comparisons of animal and human behavior.
- Begin to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.
- Becomes modest about own body. Beginning self-consciousness leads to a desire for privacy and feelings of embarrassment may be exhibited.
- Continuing development of gender identity shown by choice of leisure activities, ways in which feelings are expressed, and school subjects.

## **8 Through 12 Years of Age**

- Pre-teen children are aware, excited, interested in, and affected by the sexual aspects of their lives. These children frequently ask questions and are curious. This may be a very emotional time for children, and they may cry easily as they struggle with the transition from childhood to adolescence.

### **Physical**

- Begins to experience the physical changes of puberty (growth of genitals, breast development, etc).
- Some girls begin to menstruate. Girls need to be prepared for the onset of menstruation and boys need information regarding nocturnal emissions (“wet dreams”). Events such as these can be frightening, but information given before they happen can help ease these fears. Children and teens should be informed about puberty changes that affect both males and females.

### **Sexual**

- Peer group has increased influence on child’s self-image. Chief attachments are still to members of their own sex.
- Child may masturbate, sometimes to orgasm.

### **Developmental**

- Children begin to separate from parents. They learn that friends can have different ideas and customs and still be friends. Together, friends explore the whole range of life as they know and wonder about it.
- Physical changes and feelings of the pre-teen can be positive; if not, feelings can include guilt, confusion, and embarrassment which results in less communication within the family. The result may be less support from the family.
- Responsibility around the home increases. Parents are encouraged to avoid distinguishing between separate jobs for boys versus jobs for girls. Sexual discrimination begins at a very young age.

Source: Alberta Health. (1995). *Talking about sexuality with children*.

## TIPS FOR DISCUSSING SEXUALITY WITH YOUR CHILDREN

- ☺ Answer questions at the time that your child asks, don't put them off.
- ☺ Listen carefully to the question to make sure you understand what she/he is asking.
- ☺ Use 'teachable' moments to open discussion with a child who does not ask questions (e.g. commenting on the pregnancy of a friend or a relative may be a good introduction to the topic of pregnancy and how a baby grows in the uterus). Television programs, newspaper articles or books are other vehicles that can assist in initiating a discussion.
- ☺ Don't try to cover everything at once, but don't worry if you think you have said "too much". Your child will sift the information, or let it pass - perhaps catching a phrase here or there to ask you about later.
- ☺ Keep the language simple and age appropriate. A seven-year-old will likely have more questions about how the baby grows, and may want to know how it will come out. A ten-year-old may be interested in how identical twins are made and will be able to relate to one egg and one sperm joining and then dividing into two babies.
- ☺ Use correct terms and recognize 'body science'. It is confusing for children to have cute names for some body parts and not others.
- ☺ Check out what they already know. Older children in school will inevitably hear comments or words that they don't understand. Show your willingness to discuss these by asking what they can tell you about a particular sexual topic. This encourages communication and can give you the opportunity to correct any misinformation that they have.
- ☺ Let your children know what you think, and what standards of behavior are all right in your house. It is also important to let them know what is socially appropriate/inappropriate, and what to do if they have difficulties or questions. As children mature, it is important to help them understand that other people's standards may be different from theirs.
- ☺ Don't be afraid to say "I don't know" or to let your child know that you're embarrassed. You can say "I feel a little uncomfortable, but this is important to talk about - let's find out some answers together."

## WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW... AND WHEN THEY NEED TO KNOW IT

### Children in Grades 1 to 3 (The Bathroom Humour Types) Need to Know:

- the names for genitals – penis, testicles, scrotum, anus, vulva, labia, vagina, clitoris, uterus, ovaries;
- the scientific words: urine, stool, bladder, urethra (tube draining the bladder);
- that reproduction happens when a man's sperm joins a woman's ovum by sexual intercourse;
- that a baby grows in the uterus and is born through the vagina;
- the difference between the digestive and reproductive systems;
- everything about menstrual periods and nocturnal emissions as clean and healthy processes;
- basic information about body changes at puberty; and
- not to pick up used condoms.



At this age children often think that girls have one opening for “poop and pee”, and what girls eat goes into the same place as the baby grows. They need to know that **menstruation** is the time when a girl's body begins to grow and practice for being grown-up. The uterus practices too by making a kind of “water bed” inside itself for the baby. The bed is made of water, soft skin, and a little bit of blood. Each month, when there isn't a baby, the uterus changes the bed and the old one comes dripping out of the vagina. **Nocturnal emissions** happen when boys are eight or nine years old, or older, and their testicles begin to make sperm for practice. Some nights, when boys are fast asleep, the extra sperm come out of their penis. Only a spoonful of milky-white fluid is let out and often looks like a small wet spot on their pajamas. Menstruation and nocturnal emissions are private, of course, but not a secret.

## Children in Grades 4 to 7 (The Gross-Me-Outers) Need to Know:

- all of the previous information, plus;
- all about body changes at puberty;
- basic information about STDs and pregnancy;
- how to question and critique the distorted, popular, commercialized views of the “perfect body”;
- how to talk about the ways that sexuality is portrayed falsely in the media through television, movies, magazines, music videos and even some computer games;
- how sexuality is exaggerated in pornography and the participants are exploited; and
- that a teenager does not *have* to be sexually active.



This may be your last chance to talk before your child becomes a teenager! As children enter the teenage years they generally turn to their friends for answers and information. Work on becoming an ‘askable’ parent who will be there when they need you.

At this age they still have a million questions in their minds that they won’t ask aloud. They may have questions about *gay/lesbian relationships*. You can watch television or movies together and use opportunities when they present themselves to discuss the way that sexuality is presented. Car rides present great opportunities giving you time to talk. Use teachable moments when you are watching TV together or listening to songs with sexual lyrics. Leave literature lying around for them to look at when they feel comfortable. Talk about “body science” rather than sex, as Meg Hickling discusses in the book *More Speaking of Sex*.

Source: Hickling, M. (1996). *More speaking of sex*. Northstone Publishing: Kelowna, BC

## FINDING RESOURCES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

This information is intended to assist you in finding agencies or organizations within your community that can help support you in raising a sexually healthy child. There are many different resources available, but it is important to choose the ones that follow your family's beliefs and values.

### Things to Think About

You may want to ask some questions to determine if an agency integrates a philosophy that provides a high quality of service and education that is appropriate for the age of your child, comprehensive, and sensitive to your cultural beliefs and values, and respectful of individual choices and rights.

- What is the organization's philosophy and mission?
- That types of services do they offer?
- What type of training do the employees or volunteers receive?
- How are they funded and who are they accountable to?

### Agencies That Support Sexual Health and Education

- The **Sexual and Reproductive Health Program** of the Calgary Health Region has an education team that provides inservices to parents, school and community groups, on many sexual health related topics. The education programs are provided free of charge. To arrange a program, or to request more information on a specific topic, call 944-7115 or through [www.teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca)
- **Community Health Centers** have Public Health Nurses who are active within their communities and schools. They provide services, as well as information, counselling and referral regarding birth control, STDs, pregnancy options, and pregnancy and parenting. Some Health Centres may also have Family Planning and STD clinics. A listing of Community Health Centers in the Calgary Health Region is found in the pink pages at the front of the telephone directory. More information on services in the Calgary Health Region can be obtained by calling their information line at 943-LINK. Information on other Community/Public Health Units in Alberta's Regional Health Authorities is available by calling 1-800-432-1845, or through [www.erc.calgary.ab.ca](http://www.erc.calgary.ab.ca)
- **Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada** offers services, information and counselling on sexual and reproductive health issues. To find a local affiliate near you go to [www.ppfc.ca](http://www.ppfc.ca). In Calgary, call 283-8591.

- Your local schools provide sexual health teaching based on Alberta Learning's curriculum. The curriculum can be accessed through [www.learning.gov.ab.ca](http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca)
- Your local community health centre may have a **Community Services Directory** which will list community organizations, health and social agencies.
- Your community may have a **Family and Community Support Service** (FCSS) that may be able to direct you to other local agencies/resources, or help to set up local partnerships that focus on prevention and enhance social and health well-being. Look in the blue pages of your local telephone directory.

## Webliography for Parents

Links to web resources are provided for information only and do not imply an endorsement of views, products, or services. Although our staff regularly reviews these links, we can't be certain that they are 100% credible since their content can be changed at any time.

### **Calgary Health Region** (*Canadian*)

<http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/hlthconn/hctopics.htm>

Information and pamphlets on a variety of sexual health topics and resources.

<http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/hecomm/sexual/sexual.htm>

An on-line mailbox for your questions about sexual health topics. Answers are posted within 1-2 weeks.

### **Canadian Health Network** (*Canadian*)

[http://www.canadian-health-network.ca/faq-faq/sexuality\\_reproductive\\_health-sexualite\\_reproduction/8e.html](http://www.canadian-health-network.ca/faq-faq/sexuality_reproductive_health-sexualite_reproduction/8e.html)

Articles about talking with your child/teen about sex, links to many resources, and guidelines for finding credible web sites.

### **Teaching Sexual Health Website** (*Canadian*)

[www.teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca)

A sexual health website, based on Alberta Learning Curriculum, developed for classroom use by teachers. Includes sections for parents and students at all grade levels.

### **Sexuality and U** (*Canadian*)

<http://www.sexualityandu.ca/parents/talk.aspx>

Information about puberty, talking about sex with your child, STI and contraception.

**PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) (Canadian)**

<http://www.pflag.ca>

Information, resources and support for parents of lesbians and gays.

**Kids Health (USA)**

<http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/growth/index.html>

Articles on communication with your teen, puberty and surviving adolescence.

**I Wanna Know (USA)**

<http://www.iwannaknow.org/parents/index.html>

Information on being an “askable” parent, links to teen sites about puberty, STI, abstinence, decision-making and condom use.

**Inner Learning Online (USA)**

<http://www.innerbody.com>

Colorful anatomy pictures and text.

**Parent Soup (USA)**

<http://www.parentsoup.com/teens>

A general parenting information site with sections on talking with your teen or preteen about sex.

**Resource Center for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (USA)**

<http://www.etr.org./recapp/practice/edskills200110.htm>

A teacher-based web site, which has a section on teaching students with developmental disabilities that some parents may find useful.

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