

Ten Common Beliefs that Could Make a Grandparent out of You*

*And what you can do about it!

Below are some excuses that some parents give for not talking with their children about sex and sexuality. Here is your chance to really think through these issues and decide for yourself the why, what, when, and how of opening the lines to family communication.

1. **My child is too young to talk to about sex.**

A child's sexuality, sexual feelings, and sexual attitudes develop from the moment of birth — even before a child can speak. In fact, children start learning about sexuality through observation of family interaction and surroundings. When you don't talk with your children about sexuality, you may give them the message that there is something wrong with sexuality and that it is not a topic you're willing to discuss.

You can begin teaching your young child the basics of sexuality — anatomy, reproduction, sexual orientation, personal safety, feelings, relationships — as well as your own values. As children grow and mature, they will be more interested in details about pregnancy and birth, the changes of puberty, etc.

At the very least, preteens and teens need guidance and information about sexual feelings and relationships long before they start dating or become sexually active. Studies show that at least half of teen pregnancies occur during the first six months of sexual activity.

Even if you've never spoken to your child about sex, it is never too late to begin!

2. **We've already had "the talk."**

That's a good start! But family communication about sex and sexuality should be an ongoing process, not a one-time talk. Ongoing discussion reinforces the information you've given before — and lets them know you're available for any new questions they might have. It also lets you know about their interests and concerns.

Each child has different questions and needs for information. How you proceed will depend on your children's ages, their levels of understanding, and the social settings in which they live.

Have you talked to your children about safety or about respect and privacy? How about dating expectations, dealing with sexual feelings, responsibility, and decision making?

Sex and sexuality are complex parts of every person's life. It is important that parents offer their children continuing information and advice that can contribute to their health and well-being.

3. **My child will learn what's needed in school.**

It is a myth that children and teens today are well-informed about sexuality. Unfortunately, much of what young people learn about sex is really misinformation that

they receive from their friends and the media, which too often conveys exploitive and irresponsible messages.

Only 10 percent of public schools offer medically accurate, comprehensive sex education. Another five percent offer holistic sex ed that addresses the biological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of sex and sexuality. Even though the research shows that students who receive sex education in school are more likely to talk with their parents about sexual issues, most parents cannot count on that happening.

If your child participates in a sex education program, it can be an excellent way for you to start talking about these issues at home. Ask what sorts of things were discussed in the classes. Ask what sorts of questions other students had about the various topics. Encourage your child to come to you with other questions and concerns.

Because sex and sexuality are intimate subjects involving family values, feelings, and communication, no one is in a better position than you to help your child make wise choices about sex.

Teaching your family's spiritual values and beliefs can be an important part of each discussion about sexuality. You have the right *and* the responsibility to do that with your child.

4. I don't know what to say to my child.

Many parents feel awkward at first. Perhaps you never discussed sexuality with your own parents and don't have role models to follow. You may feel you don't know enough about the subject to teach your children, or you may simply feel too embarrassed to bring up the issue. You are not alone — 98 percent of parents report that they need help in talking to their children about sexuality.

Despite how uncomfortable it may feel, it is critical that you start talking, now. Find a quiet time to sit down and list the types of messages you want to give your child. It is much easier to talk about sensitive subjects when you think about what you want to say in advance and have a chance to clarify your own thoughts and values. It usually takes practice to become comfortable talking about sex, so some parents find it useful to rehearse what they'll say.

Seek help. You can prepare yourself by purchasing or borrowing high-quality sex education resources, books, pamphlets, or videos. Talk with other parents about their own experiences and anxieties.

Spouses should talk with each other about their views and sexual values. There are likely to be differences, but by discussing these differences with each other, parents can decide what to convey to a child in a consistent and open way.

Tell your child what facts you know. If something comes up that you don't know, find out together. It can be a great experience!

5. I never know how to bring up the subject.

Finding the right time to talk to children about sex and sexuality can be difficult. Some children make it easier for parents by asking questions and bringing up the subject themselves. Others, especially teens, may not seem to have any questions at all.

Look for opportunities, or “teachable moments,” to discuss sexuality with your children. Take advantage of teachable moments while you’re together watching television or a movie. Talk about newspaper articles, advertisements, the beginning signs of puberty in your child, a pregnancy or birth in the family, etc.

Talk about sexual issues with other adults in your children’s presence. This can give your children the message that it’s an “okay” subject to discuss in your household.

If talking doesn’t seem to be working, it may be helpful to give your child books and pamphlets to read privately. Follow up by talking with your child about the information and messages that were read.

6. I’m afraid I’ll tell my child too much or not enough.

The more you are able to gear the information to your child’s experiences and developmental level, the more effective your family discussions about sexuality will be.

Preschoolers generally have very basic questions about their anatomy and the differences between girls and women and boys and men. A very common question is “Where do babies come from?” They need simple, straightforward, and basic answers. It’s also important to teach personal safety rules, such as what body parts are private and how to respond to touching.

Preteens need facts about the physical and emotional changes to expect during puberty. They are usually concerned about being “normal,” their changing bodies, their heightened sexual feelings, their gender identity, and their sexual orientation.

Teens may say that they already know everything there is to know, but they are often clueless when it comes to information about reasonable and unreasonable expectations and the ins and outs of romantic relationships, sexual values, love, how to say “No, not now,” sexual orientation, sexual expression, sexual behavior, etc.

As a general rule, tell your child just a bit more than you think can be understood, and use your best judgment. Most experts agree that you can’t hurt your child by giving too much information. If you tell more than can be understood, your child will often get bored or change the subject.

7. If I give information, my child will “try it.”

Talking with your child about sexuality will not encourage them to experiment on their own. In fact, studies show that teens who are the most sexually active are the ones who know the *least* about sexual behavior and responsibility.

By talking with your child about sex, you will be *giving permission* to come to you with concerns and questions. Your child will learn that it’s okay to talk with you, ask you questions, and seek your advice.

Children whose parents have talked openly and honestly with them about sexuality are more likely to postpone first intercourse longer than those whose parents never talked to them. And when these young women and men do choose to have sex play with another person, they are more likely to be responsible about protecting themselves and their partners.

Would you rather talk with your child, or have them get their information from sitcoms, soap operas, teen magazines, talk shows, or other teenagers? The choice is yours.

8. My kid already knows how to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

This is a risky assumption to make. You'd be amazed at the amount of false information that young people "know" about sex, especially when it comes to pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). You can and should help your child tell the difference between accurate information and misinformation.

Be honest with your child — and with yourself — and avoid "scare tactics." Although it is important to provide factual information about the positive and negative consequences of sexual activity, don't succumb to a common parental tendency to over-emphasize "all the awful things that happen to people who have sex." If you do, it is likely that your child will avoid talking with you about sex in the future.

Also, remember that there's more to know about sex than reproduction, intercourse, and pregnancy. When we limit our teaching to these subjects, it's like telling children how to check the oil, change a tire, and to put gas in the car. They may know how to take care of the car, but they still don't know how to drive it.

Children need clear guidelines about social and sexual behavior. They need to know about communication, self-esteem, marriage, parenthood, sexual desire, love, commitment, intimacy, values, contraception, safer sex, and so much more.

9. It's okay, I taught my kid to "Just say, `No.'"`

Good! Children need to be taught that it's okay and smart to say, "No." But there is more to it than just saying, "No."

Television, music, magazines, and their peers are telling them, "Go for it!" They continually hear that "It's beautiful, it's glamorous, it makes you happy, it makes you feel good, it makes you a woman or a man, and everybody's doing it!"

Surprising as it may sound, many teens say that no one ever taught them *how* to "Just say, `No.'" They need to be armed with skills that can get them out of a pressure situation. They need help learning what to say in response to sexual pressures.

Your children need to know how to avoid risky situations, how to handle negative peer pressure, and how to objectively judge messages from the media. They also need to understand that "going for it" could make them teen parents or put them at risk for a life-threatening infection.

Children who are able to say, “No,” are children who

- feel they have a future
- know how to plan for the future
- are confident and feel good about themselves
- know how to communicate assertively
- know and value friendships, relationships, and have family support

Continue encouraging your child to understand when it’s probably better to say, “No.” But don’t forget to also share your values about when it is okay to say, “Yes.”

10. My kid never listens to me, anyway.

Talk, listen, and keep the conversation going. Children really do hear. In fact, most teens say they would like to communicate more with their parents when it comes to issues related to sex and sexuality.

Follow the “four R’s”: repeat, revise, reassure, and rephrase. You may need to revise what you say in light of what your child says or when situations change or when you have new information. You may need to rephrase information in different ways and at different times to help your child understand.

Children also need reassurance that they are normal, that their questions are normal, and that their confusion and anxieties are normal. Say that you are glad your child came to you with questions and concerns. By giving reassurance, you help your child, develop positive self-esteem and open communication in your family.

The messages parents give their children about sex are verbal and nonverbal. Just being there for your children can make a difference. A lack of love, support, and nurturing at home can lead children to “look for love in all the wrong places” and for all the wrong reasons.

Let your children know that they are loved, lovable, and loving. Help them to feel valuable —valuable enough to keep safe, healthy, and protected!

There are no simple solutions to decrease today’s rates of teen pregnancy and STIs, and parents aren’t the only ones responsible for their children’s beliefs and behaviors. Parents and friends of children, however, can and should play a very important role in raising children who are able to make thoughtful, responsible, and safe decisions about sexual behavior and relationships.

Don’t let common beliefs get in your way!

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