"HOW WAS I BORN? TELL ME."

EDUCATING YOUR CHILD ABOUT SEX

■ BY SUPRIYA PADMANABHAN

Do you break out in a sweat when your child wants to know where babies come from? Of course, you told her about the responsible stork who placed her at your doorstep. But she's at that age when she knows storks have better things to do. Was there ever a time when you had a frank discussion regarding sex?

If not, consider these statistics (source: The Times of India, April 26, 2009):

- Only 18% of children get guidance from their parents.
- Parents worry that talking to children about sex/sexuality will lead to experimentation.
- The majority of pre-teens and teens get sex education from friends, and porn sites and movies. This leads to titillating unhealthy attitudes.
- Countries with a holistic approach towards sex education have a lower teen pregnancy ratio. India's statistics of 2005-2006 show that one in six Indian girls between 15 and 19 years are mothers.
- Government statistics indicate that 40% of the sexually transmitted infections are in the 15-29 age group. More than 31% of all reported AIDS cases occur in this age group, which indicates that young Indians are a high-risk demographic.

If you haven't had 'that kind of talk' yet, perhaps it's time to do so now, especially if your child is more than nine years old. Children today, actually know a lot more about such topics than you think they do. Do not forget that teens nowadays receive sexually explicit text messages (called 'sexting'), usually in the form of 'jokes'. They not only giggle together or attempt to guess the meaning, but also share half-baked facts gathered from friends, cousins and the omniscient Internet.

Often, children will try to verify from you those facts. Avoiding the issue will make them realize that we are uncomfortable with this topic. That will leave the door open for wrong information to reach them. The best you can do as a parent is to arm them with age-appropriate facts.

The most important message you must convey is that sex is a very natural and normal thing among married people.

Without making sex sound exciting, explain it in a way that doesn't make them feel ashamed or guilty. Not only will you have to explain the 'act' but also teach them about respecting the opposite gender, and understanding and recognizing their bodies. As one 14-year-old said: "Because my mom

told me all about sex, it seems natural and normal to me. My friends react weirdly when the topic comes up."

RECOGNIZING YOUR OWN ATTITUDE

As parents, we need to shed our inhibitions first. I realized this at a Parenting Matters workshop. Here, parents with children from the age of four and up were asking for guidance on how to handle this awkward subject.

We were told to ask ourselves: how did we learn about sex? Did friends and cousins whisper it in our ears? Did the information surprise us? Was there a sense of shame attached to sexuality and our body?

This brought in us a realization as to why most of us feel varying degrees of discomfort while talking about something so natural. After all, sex is supposed to be an expression of love and bonding. Talking about sex is uncomfortable because it carries many labels like 'secret' and 'sinful'. We should not let our children associate these labels with their sexuality or the physical aspects of expressing love.

WHEN TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN

- Think what values you would like to pass on
- Be calm and rehearse your information capsule if it helps
- Verify the question
- Be honest and matter-of-fact
- Keep it simple. Add technical details according to the age
- Act like a parent, not a friend
- Don't preach. Understand why they are asking questions
- Show an interest in their questions and ideas
- Use opportunities (animals mating, pregnancy) to explain facts
- Do not get angry or punish them
- Ask for feedback to ensure they have understood you

WORKSHOP TALES

At the workshop, a few parents shared their thoughts.

Let's listen to Ameena's story. She didn't want her child to discover sex as she thought it was something to be ashamed of. Her attitude stems from a childhood episode when at seven years, she caught her uncle and aunt in an embrace. They yelled at her, and Ameena felt guilty and scared. Because of that incident, she finds it difficult even today to hug her husband and children.

Instead of yelling, had the adults gently told Ameena that she should not disturb them as it was their private time together, Ameena would not have developed a negative attitude towards sex.

Radhika said she wanted to educate her son that women are not 'dirty' during menstruation. Her husband's family did not allow a menstruating woman to enter the kitchen. The boy was told that this was because she is unclean at that time. Radhika feels that he still thinks it is 'unclean'. She thinks that the best way to remove that way of thinking would be to help him understand what biological changes a woman's body undergoes and how that has affected certain beliefs and rituals.

Meera has decided to have a frank talk with her daughter. "After my first kiss, I thought I was pregnant and was terrified. I don't want my daughter to be as ignorant as I was," says Meera.

Such situations are normal at every home. You must realize that the goal of such talks is not to load your child with information or to make them perverts. Instead, early discussions will make them appreciate their bodies and sexuality, and ensure that they feel comfortable enough to approach us when they need help.

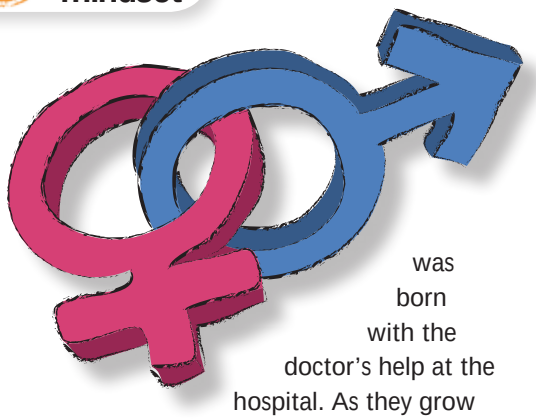
WHEN AND HOW TO TALK

Start early. Teach children that certain parts of their body are 'private' as they are their own. Tell them that no one is allowed to touch their private parts, except parents and caregivers who help to wash or wipe them. This way, children can empower themselves against abuse. You can have this talk with your 2-3-year-old child.

Use the actual words. Use words like penis or vagina, and not nicknames while referring to the genitals. During bath time, label those parts just as the way you label 'ears' and 'eyes'. This will ensure that there is no miscommunication if a child later tells you that someone touched her inappropriately.

Keep messages simple and repeat them. You may tell your three-year-old 'no one is allowed to touch your penis/vagina'. To a six-year-old, you can say if he likes to play with his penis, he should do it in private. He will get the message that what he is doing is normal, but there are certain norms to observe. Repeat that he cannot touch others' private parts, and that no one should touch his. As children grow, they forget the earlier talks. Repeat the messages.

Answer questions keeping in mind your child's age. When we discuss childbirth with little children, we talk about the seed from a father and the egg from a mother. We say the baby ▸▸



was born with the doctor's help at the hospital. As they grow older, we should add to the information. They need to feel free to clarify and ask when more doubts arise.

Use real-life situations to start a talk. A little girl saw dogs mating and approached her mom with questions. Another mother was asked what the 'F' word meant. She used that opportunity to say that some people use the word badly to describe something that is actually natural and beautiful. Valli said she had to attend a coming-of-age ceremony of a niece and used that occasion to educate her 12-year-old son about puberty.

Use resources. Seek help from friends, grandparents, family doctors, books and websites to tackle your child's questions when you feel confused. Marina's nine-year-old son asked her how babies were born. She began with how the body develops as boys and girls grow older. Using a book with diagrams as a guide, she explained to her son how his body will change too.

Understand the question. "Dad, what's sex?" asks a little girl. Her father draws a chair close to her, takes a deep breath, and begins a basic introduction to sex. When he's done, she asks with a puzzled look: "Okay, so what do I put in this form the swimming coach asked me to fill?" Before giving out information ask: "What do you think it means?", "What have you heard about it?" and the like.

How much to say? Each parent has to determine that himself. Be aware of the messages you send. Children/ teens can easily access porn sites. So do not avoid awkward questions from them, whether it is on oral sex or anything that borders on the pervert – but educate them properly taking a non-emotional approach, highlighting the dangers and undesirability as needed, which the porn sites will not do.

Remember foremost that your teenager also needs to know the facts to protect herself from physical abuse and cyber sex harassment. When a 13-year-old asked her mother about oral sex, the mother quickly said: "I'll look up some facts and then discuss it with you." This bought her time to reflect how much information she must give her child. She finally used the clinical terms from the dictionary, discussed the origin of the Latin word 'fellatio', discussed oral hygiene, and concluded by saying that one had to be very comfortable with one's spouse to enjoy it. She advised her daughter that many children were abused by adults this way, because they did not know the facts.

Don't wait for the event to happen before discussing it. Even today, mothers postpone discussing menstruation with their daughters. The average age at which a girl achieves puberty can vary from 8-16. This is not just a topic for girls. Children today are almost always in a co-ed environment. If the boys are aware, then they will be more sensitive towards girls. One mother explained to her son that instead of making fun of a girl with a stained skirt, he should bring it to her attention directly or through a teacher or her friend.

Mary, a parent, says her son was upset one morning to find his night clothes soiled. She spent the day reassuring him, and answering his questions about bodily emissions. Despite her discomfort with the subject, her only regret was that she did not have the conversation with him before the event. Another mother said her son felt that he was wetting his underwear. Although fathers are the best persons to discuss this with sons, her husband's reluctance made her download Tarshi's *The Red Book* for her son to read.

Handling embarrassing questions. Explain that some things are personal and you are not comfortable sharing details of your sex life. Sometimes, a child may innocently clarify something in public. Swallow your embarrassment, and respond! Or promise a response later, when you can also explain to the child how uncomfortable others are with the topic.

Once you have begun the talks, handling their questions becomes easier. We have to tell our children the facts, and convey our values. If you haven't already begun, start today. ■

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Resources

http://www.tarshi.net/downloads/red-book.pdf

http://www.babycenter.com/0_how-to-talk-to-your-child-about-sex_67112.bc?page=1

http://www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/talking-kids-about-sex-sexuality-37962.htm

http://fatherhood.about.com/od/sexeducation/a/tas_tweens.htm