

Developmental Stages in Sexual Health Teaching

Why talk about sexuality?

- Children who are educated about healthy bodies and healthy sexuality are better protected from abuse and exploitation.
- Educated youth are able to make better sexual health decisions, and are more likely to delay sexual activity, and are less likely to be promiscuous or in unsafe relationships.
- Youth value their parents and other adults in their lives as sources of accurate sexual health information.

Ages 2-5

-Preschoolers will do a lot of magical thinking around issues of reproduction if no one tells them the truth (i.e. they may believe that babies are brought by storks).

-Preschoolers accept information about their bodies in the same matter of fact way they accept information about anything else and are the easiest of all ages to teach about sexual health.

Parent note:

- It is important to talk with children about sexuality.
- Children need to learn and understand your family values rather than learning about sexuality from television, the internet or friends.

What to teach:

- Names of the all the body parts including the genitals – penis, testicles, scrotum, anus, vulva, vagina, clitoris, uterus, ovaries.
- Difference between public and private, and that sexual parts of our bodies are special and private and we keep them covered in public.
- Good touch versus bad touch.
- Basics of reproduction; that the penis goes into the vagina and delivers sperm.
- That babies grow in the uterus, not in the tummy or stomach.
- Menstruation (periods) and nocturnal emissions (wet dreams) are a clean and healthy process.
- Not to pick up used condoms.

Grades 1-3

-Children's favourite jokes centre around bathroom humour.

-At this age, children are often fascinated by bodily functions and may have the digestive system confused with the reproductive system.

- Children become confused when they are given incorrect information, such as being told that babies grow in stomachs, or men have seeds.
- Children at this age are learning about the concept of gender (socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities) and sexual stereotyping.
- Children at this age have the ability to ask questions without shame; they want to know how things work and are very literal (i.e. they think babies are built like robots).

Parent note:

- Treat questions with respect and seize every teachable moment to give factual health information.
- Remember that a child never asks questions out of the blue- they have either heard or experienced something.
- Children at this age may go through a modesty phase which provides an opportunity to set boundaries around family nudity.

What to teach:

- Everything previously noted plus additional scientific words (urine, stool, bladder, and urethra).
- The difference between the digestive and reproductive systems.
- Full information about menstruation and wet dreams.
- Basic information about body changes at puberty.
- Acceptance of body types (i.e. all bodies are different and all are normal).

Grades 4-7

- At this age children develop their own personal boundaries around sexuality.
- Children in this age group begin to demand privacy.
- Children at this age are fascinated by pregnancy, miscarriage and multiple births (twins).
- These children are going through puberty and need information about their changing bodies and emotions but want the information to be strictly technical.

Parent note:

- An excellent time to talk is while doing an activity together where eye contact is optional (i.e. driving, walking together).
- Treat children's fears seriously.

What to teach:

- Everything at the earlier age groups plus body changes at puberty (body hair growth, menstruation, breast development, penis/testicle growth, erections, wet dreams, hygiene, skin changes, hormones)
- Puberty happens at different times for everybody, and this is normal.
- Masturbation (what it is, that it is normal, and it's done only in private).
- Basic sexually transmitted disease information.
- Understanding that not everyone is sexually active.
- They have the right to refuse touch from anyone at any time, and also need to respect that others have same right.
- Introduction to gender identity and that not everyone identifies as male or female (gender roles, stereotypes, address and debunk myths).
- Media smarts around issues like pornography and the pressure to have the perfect body.

Grades 7-12

-This age group believes that they know all about sexuality by virtue of being teen-agers, the internet and easy access to pornography.

-This age group needs information and guidance to understand consequences of sexual behaviour, to understand they are capable of giving and receiving love, capable of responsible decision-making (including the use of birth control), and to develop the ability to make decisions independently.

-Alcohol and drug use can lead to risky decision making about sexual activity.

-Teens often believe that everyone is having sex, but Canadian statistics such as the [McCreary Adolescent Health Survey](#) do not support this (the majority of Grade 7–12 students in BC are **not** sexually active, and youth who do have sex are waiting longer to do so than their peers who took the survey five, 10 or 15 years earlier).

Parent note:

- Listen without judgement.
- Set limits or ground rules for your teens.
- Teach teens to care for others and respect and care for themselves.
- Try playing the “what if” game to help the conversation flow (i.e. what would you do if a friend wanted to run away?).

What to teach:

- Everything the previous age groups have learned, plus information in greater detail about reproduction, pregnancy and birth.
- How to use and where to access birth control, emergency contraceptives and condoms, as well as their effectiveness and failure rates.



- What sexually transmitted infections are and how to protect themselves.
- Refusal skills.
- Respecting boundaries and personal space of self and others.
- The importance of consent.
- Body image and body changes, gender roles, stereotypes.
- Relationship skills and the differences between healthy vs. unhealthy romantic relationships.