

Talking to young children about relationships, babies and bodies:
What parents think

Nicole Stone, Roger Ingham, Laura McGinn and Andrew Bengry-Howell

Centre for Sexual Health Research, University of Southampton

Young children are naturally inquisitive about the world around them. They want to know about family life and relationships, about babies and where they come from, about bodies and growing-up.

Knowing how to respond to children's curiosity is something many parents find challenging, and may even be fearful of, especially when questions and behaviours are considered to be of a sexual nature.

Parents of older children and teenagers are constantly reminded of the need to talk openly about relationships, puberty, sex, pregnancy and contraception. Open communication can protect young people from harm, enable them to make informed decisions and help them look after their sexual health when they eventually start having sex. Yet for parents with much younger children, the need to talk about relationships, babies and bodies is far less clear-cut. Parents, and society more widely, are concerned that young children are being increasingly exposed to sexual messages, attitudes and values through media and marketing. It is against this background that this research was conducted by the Centre for Sexual Health Research.

The aim of this study was to explore parents' experiences of talking to young children (4-7 years) about sexual matters, their reactions and responses to their child's emerging sexual curiosity, and their desires and fears regarding sexual knowledge in the early childhood years.

This summary highlights the major reasons parents give for talking, or not talking, about relationships, babies, bodies and other sexual matters with their children.

Methodology

Using focus group discussions and interviews, views and opinions were gathered from a range of parents drawn from different cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds from within London and South Central England. One hundred and ten parents with young children participated in group discussions and 49 follow-up interviews were conducted.

The parents who participated had caring responsibilities for 249 children (55% girls and 45% boys). Although at least one of these children was in the target age group of 4-7 years, many parents had other children, some of whom were older and some younger.



Highlights

- Parents wish to be open and honest with their children. Parental concerns and anxieties, however, restrict what children actually learn.
- Parents report a strong desire to protect their children from sexualising influences, to safeguard them from sexual predators and to preserve their 'innocence'.
- Desire to protect children from 'unsuitable' learning often means that communication occurs only when children ask questions.
- There is little agreement among parents about how, and when, children should learn about relationships, babies and bodies.
- Parents who do talk openly with their children do so to protect them from misinformation and ignorance.
- It is not all about bodies and how babies are made. Parents are keen that young children develop an understanding of broader issues such as personal safety.

Should we talk?

Parents acknowledge that they have an important role to play as sexuality educators of their children, expressing determination to do better than their own parents. Many, however, have not seriously considered – either as individuals or as couples – about what exactly this involves, and how best to do it. As such, they are often 'caught off guard' when the first questions come.

Last week my son came up to me and just asked the question out of the blue, "Daddy, how did I get into mummy?" I never thought that kind of conversation was going to start when he was five.

Parents generally feel that openness, accompanied by honesty and truth, is the best approach. Some parents feel confident that they are doing a good job. Others, despite their good intentions, find it very challenging.

Many parents express concern about discussing particular topics or sharing certain details with younger children. This results in incomplete answers, half-truths or, in some instances, complete avoidance of answering questions.

Parents rarely discuss these topics



Children are inquisitive

Reasons not to talk

They are just children...

Some parents believe that discussing issues of a sexual nature is unnecessary and inappropriate to their children's lives. Children are frequently considered 'too young' and 'unable to understand'. Parents are particularly concerned that sexual knowledge will destroy 'innocence', yet find it difficult to explain how having knowledge about relationships, babies and bodies means a child is no longer considered innocent.

He used to ask me questions about babies and how they got into the tummy and stuff like that. I felt he was too young, he wouldn't be able to comprehend the answer, I thought it's not really the appropriate time to answer it. So I said, "It's just a bit of magic." He just didn't need to be rushed into learning about everything. They're still children and sometimes it's quite nice to stay a little bit innocent for a bit longer.

I want to protect them...

Some parents frequently avoid giving full explanations to protect their children from things that may worry or concern them.

[Daughter] found some tampons and she was like what are these mummy, and I was like, "Oh they're just something ladies need". She was like, "What for?" And I thought, oh at five, I don't think I want to go into periods right now. It would scare you.

If they ask I think you give your response according to what you feel they can cope with. And, I think that's the whole thing about it, when they're four and five, babies come out the tummy, because to tell them it came out of a hole between their legs would scare them to death.

I'm not sure how to do it...

Some parents feel uncomfortable talking about certain subjects and are unsure how best to explain matters – what words to use, how to phrase things and how far to go with explanations.

I'm really scared and I have no idea how to talk to her. I mean I'm trying my best... to be honest it's, I mean I feel really, really shy... I'm getting a bit scared, I've no idea what I'm going to do.

It's hard to explain in language that a seven-year old will understand.

I can remember [son] asking me something and thinking oh, I need to just think about how I answer that. And you know, sometimes I think if you start talking you perhaps give them more than what you actually want to.

Parents are also worried about initiating 'difficult' conversations so instead leave it until their children ask questions.

It will give them ideas...

Some parents are nervous that giving young children sexual knowledge may be risky and dangerous. It could give children ideas which results in experimentation, it might spark interest that wasn't previously there and it could promote early sexualisation (sexual awareness inappropriate for a child's stage of development).

I don't want to be responsible if I tell him the story of sex and he's trying it off with someone in the class.

I'm waiting to tell her when she is older, cos I don't know, maybe these things could, you know, slightly affect them... Make them act a certain way just because they know about 'it'. So, I'd rather her know nothing.

I don't want to be judged...

Some parents are concerned that if they educate their children about sexual matters or use certain words or terms there may be unwelcome sharing of the information in the playground and with friends. Other adults may criticise or make judgements as a result, possibly even associate a child's knowledge with sexual contact and abuse.

I just really don't want them to use those words [vagina/penis] in the classroom because what if such and such's mum overhears it or the child says it and then the parents hear back. That bothers me the most.

You don't want to say too much in case they go into school the next day and start talking about it and then all of a sudden you've got the school on the phone.

Parents even tell their children not to pass on any information they have been given.

Most of the time, when I just talk about these things, I say, "But don't talk about this to your friends, because their mummies might not like them to know about this yet."



Some parents find it difficult to talk...

Reasons to talk

They need to know the truth...

Some parents understand that young children are in need of information and guidance, not only to provide facts and answer their questions, but also to reduce misinformation, confusion and to prevent taboos. Ignorance and denial, in their view, is not protective.

I know that I perhaps upset a couple of people because I told her the truth. And it is hard because everyone wants to keep their child as their lovely little innocent. But the fact is, you know, they're not going to be forever. And although I don't want to sort of push her into the maturity, I can't lie to her. And I can't not tell her things for the sake of other people... But if they ask you, I feel as though it's my way of protecting her, is to tell her the truth.

By the time they come and eventually talk to us about it, they'll already be confused. Do you know what I'm saying. So there's certain things they need to know like about the body, like what this part of your body does and stuff like that.

I want them to be able to talk to me about things...

Some parents wish to form strong, open relationships with their children. They want them to feel able to come and talk to them about anything.

You have a very small window of opportunity to talk to your children about this, with them feeling comfortable and you feeling comfortable. I think it might also impact on other things and other areas of life that they may or may not confide in you. If you can't be open and accepting of these questions then there may be other things that they might not come to you about.

They are being exposed to so much already...

Some parents are aware that their children pick up clues and signals from all around them which affect their understanding about love, relationships and behaviour. Parents want to provide a balance to the often misleading and inappropriate messages given out by other sources (particularly in the media).

You know if you listen to the words of some of the songs, they are absolutely obscene, and, you know, and kids are being exposed to this. And they're seeing it and they're being sexualised without understand what it's all about. You know, they're doing the kind of the dance moves and all of that... and of course kids don't understand it... what's appropriate or not appropriate or when it might be appropriate, because it's there in front of them... I will only let them watch something if I can sit down and watch it with them, to be absolutely sure what it is they're watching. I can then have a conversation with them about it, if there is something inappropriate I can talk to them about it.

Ignorance can be a threat...

Some parents agree that children need to know that not all adults are 'good' people. Keeping bodies and sexual matters a taboo subject can help abusers keep their crimes secret.

How do you translate what's happening in the press to your children without scaring them, but making them also aware? I've had to cover a couple of stories where I thought no, I think it's important for my daughter to be aware of this. I am keen to not scare her, but make her aware that horrible things do happen. There are horrible people out there. I hope I am surrounded by nice people, but I don't know and I just want her to be aware.

I want my children to have healthy and positive relationships...

Some parents are eager that their children grow up respecting both themselves and others. Importantly they should develop an understanding of their own and other people's feelings, that sexual experiences should occur in caring relationships and that nobody should be forced to do things that they are not comfortable with.

I think we're putting the cart before the horse. We're talking a great deal about the anatomy of sex. But we're actually, for me, and this is my feelings, we're not talking about the relationships and the feelings that should produce the sexual act.

It's very important for me to get across to my boys that they must respect people. Actually, you know, in all, across the board, but particularly in their relationships with girls. It's important for them to understand, when we get to that stage, that, you know, she's maybe an object to desire, but she's also a person in her own right and how you put that across I don't know. But I know I will be going on and on and on about it.



...some find it easier

Conclusions

Parents involved in this study were acutely aware of their responsibilities for educating their children about sexual matters and felt strongly that they should be in control, in so far as possible, of the learning that their children receive in the early years. Various reasons for and against providing certain knowledge at different ages have been summarised in this short report.

Parents commonly expressed a desire to be open and honest with their children; however, relatively few parents had carefully considered - in advance - how any learning should occur, or had discussed their views and feelings with their partners. Consequently, their reactions to questions were typically delivered ad hoc, with little forethought and planning.

Further, the majority of parents reacted to their child's sexual curiosity in isolation. Given the extent of fear of criticism and judgements about being a 'bad parent' if 'too much' is said, they use the 'wrong' terminology or their child shares information with others, it is perhaps surprising that so few parents had spoken to other parents about their concerns. Such anxieties led to parents frequently erring on the side of caution by limiting what they say, and going against their intentions to be open.

A short term research project of this nature cannot address questions concerning the likely medium and longer term impact on children of different styles of parental communication. However, research from elsewhere suggests that not having an answer to, or an explanation for, something they have seen or heard can be worrying and confusing to a child, as can receiving different messages from different sources.

Further research

A number of areas are suggested that would benefit from further research; these include the possible role of schools in developing clear norms and guidance for parents and teachers, further exploration of the nature of the fears that parents have in relation to greater openness, the impact of responding to questions from boys and girls in different ways, the particular challenges faced by others with caring responsibilities, including foster carers, step parents and adoptive parents, and the likely impact of the focus on reproduction on attitudes towards diversity and difference.

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www.southampton.ac.uk/psychology/research
cshr@southampton.ac.uk



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