

The Talk: Taking One for the Team and Getting Through it (Almost) Unscathed

By Jennifer Harrison

Long, long ago in the wilds of New Jersey, my then-6 year old daughter pondered the origin of life while soaking in a tubful of bubbles. I was out for the evening so she summoned my husband with her question.

“Daddy, where do babies come from?” she asked.

My husband paused for a few moments and then responded, “Ask your sister.”

Her sister was 9 at the time.

Nobody enjoys these questions or discussions, but – alas! – they are necessary pests. Without teaching them how to make good choices and how to stay safe, we run the risk of our loved ones getting erroneous information from the internet or making it up as they go along. And as history has shown, that rarely ends well. So, after returning home that evening, I battened cleanup for my team. Informational mistakes were rectified, myths were debunked, and my little one was stunned to learn that couples do not, in fact, make babies by peeing in the same toilet. (I later informed my then-9 year old that it’s not nice to punk your sister. We all learned that night.)

I tell you this admittedly discomfiting story for a reason. As a cautionary tale to squeamish fathers? A caveat not to leave the house without a sex therapist on speed-Dial?

No, I am sharing simply to highlight a prevailing truth: that most of us will do whatever it takes to avoid The Talk.

How can we make it easier, calmer, and less traumatic to the teller as well as the listener? Here are a few suggestions from the experts.

Don’t Shy Away From Those Words

Whoever was in charge of naming the parts of human anatomy sure did a doozy. Whether the words are embarrassing-sounding in and of themselves or humiliating because of what they signify, our private parts can be difficult to discuss.

But it is so important that we teach them! We all need to know what our body parts are

actually called so we can clearly communicate with our caregivers, our doctors, and the police, if need be. Nicknames are not universal, and the on-call gynecologist may not know what we mean by “my hoo-ha.” Teach the words. They become less cringe-y as you do it.

And once you can freely throw around language like “penis,” “testicles,” and “vulva,” try to keep the giggling and eye-rolling to a minimum. While it can be bonding to share a blush and shrug with your child/student/curious neighbor, shame can be contagious. So be sure to present the facts in the most positive, upbeat light. And that means speaking those words with confidence. (I mean, we have no problem talking about that fabulous planet, Venus; is it such a big leap to its rhyme?)

Don’t Believe That Facts Incite Action

Among our greater fears is inadvertently introducing newer! more exciting! cutting edge! Sexual information that our students can race out and replicate as if education were a thrilling suggestion. It is, therefore, tempting to omit addressing certain sexual acts and language that we’d rather they never learn. Like, all of it.

But the fact is, they will learn it. And if they don’t learn it, they’ll probably figure it out on their own. And if they don’t figure it out, they’ll wind up hearing about and possibly doing something else we’d rather weren’t featured on their sexual menu.

Thankfully, finding out about a sex act does not predestine its performance. On the contrary, according to sex-positive parenting expert Airial Clark, research shows that “teens who talk with their parents about sex, relationships, birth control and pregnancy begin to have sex at later ages, use condoms and birth control more often if they do have sex, and have better communication with romantic partners and have sex less often.” And this is the goal! We’ve unearthed The Secret to Responsible Sex!

Now, does that mean we should fire up “Eyes Wide Shut” and prepare to take notes together? No. (You’re welcome.)

But if your student is old/savvy enough to ask the question, they are probably mature enough to get the answer. When they do approach you, be honest and be frank. Give only necessary information until they are ready to hear more. And feel free to follow up with a “But I don’t recommend you do this now. It’s really only good with someone you love.” That may be the heads-up that sticks.

Find Your Cue

What if Junior never asks about sex or their private parts? What if the years tick by and we remain surprisingly, conspicuously cringe-free?

Bring it up yourself, and appropriate for their age. Experts suggest that children should learn the proper names of their body parts as soon as they begin talking. If it's too late to catch that train, try tossing around some of those words today!

“Hey, did I ever mention that your butt is really called your anus?”

Too awkward? Then just start using them in conversation. Ask if their zipper is broken in the area of their pants “that covers your penis/vulva” or ask if their breasts are sore from that pecs workout at the Y. If they stare at you blankly, the door is open for discussion.

“...What? You’ve never heard that word before? Let’s review!”

Once a child is in middle school – or beyond – talking about sex will probably just mean filling in gaps in information they have already been collecting for months... or years. So, the discussion doesn’t have to amount to scaling Everest (it won’t be that long a trek), maybe just getting yourselves to base camp in one piece.

There are so many great ways to work sex and anatomy into conversations; mentioning a friend who has become pregnant (“by the way, are you familiar with how that happens?”), addressing a relationship - or sex-related scene on TV (“wow, I hope they considered birth control...”), or discussing an ad for tampons or condoms (“ribbed or not, this is a great way to avoid pregnancy and STIs!”). Ask if they understand what’s going on; ask if they have any questions. Sexuality is all around us, we just need to nod to it when we see it.

Include “Consent!”

The birds and the bees both have to want to do what birds and bees do, or they shouldn’t do it!

That’s the message we cannot forget to mention to our loved ones. Because the parts and processes involved in sex are important, but just as important are the respect, safety, and lawfulness of sex.

Therefore, we need to repeat (and repeat... and repeat!) that consent is:

Mutual

Enthusiastic

Informed (they know what it is they are agreeing to do!)

Sustained (anyone can take away their consent at any point – before, during, 30 minutes or even 30 times in!)

Awake and alert (never under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or sleep)

We must teach our kids that no one is allowed to touch their breasts, penis, vulva, or butt without consent (unless it's by a doctor - and they can keep a trusted adult in the room with them during an exam, if they prefer). And they are not to touch anyone else's private parts (or, let's be honest, any body part) without consent. It is for their safety and the safety of those around them. Courtrooms are full of people who have committed sexual violence without understanding that what they were doing is illegal, as well as survivors who didn't know they were allowed to say "no." Let's keep our kids out of the justice system and safe.

Call for Backup

There's no need to sweat this stuff on your own. Look online together or break open a book. Sit in on an age-appropriate sex ed. class or pair up with an equally-squeamish friend and tag team the topic.

Talking about sex does not have to be as uncomfortable as we fear it does. Practice – along with understanding its importance – makes it a whole lot easier.

“Sex Ed. Isn’t Actually About Sex”

Per Harvard Medical School’s Center for Primary Care, sexuality education “teaches critical life skills that are desperately needed in our society,” and is not just about the mechanics of the act. A truly comprehensive take on the subject will cover healthy relationships, self-esteem, body confidence, gender equity, communication, empathy, respect, and self-advocacy. (And let's not forget that repeated lesson about consent!)

It gives our students power over their behavior, relationships, and bodies.

It gives our students a voice in what happens to them, and how.

Most important, it allows our students to become the healthy, responsible, and independent people we know they can be. And we all need people like that on our team.

