



Let's
Talk
About . . .

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Tips for Talking about Sexuality with Your Child Who Has Developmental Disabilities

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Conversations about sexuality can yield many benefits when you talk with your child who has developmental disabilities. The positive effects for your child include, not only an understanding of sexuality, but also opportunities to learn, grow, and build skills for life. Talking about sexuality sets the stage for talking, without guilt or embarrassment, about body parts and their functions. It sets the stage for your child to articulate life goals. It equips young people to understand behaviors that are inappropriate in public or that are destructive to relationships, trust, and self-esteem. It enables young people to recognize and prevent abuse and exploitation. Many parents also observe their children increasing in self-esteem and self-empowerment as they master key concepts related to sexuality.

Young people who have developmental disabilities deserve accurate, age and developmentally appropriate sexual health information. This can sometimes be challenging for parents and young people if some learning channels are blocked or if commonly used teaching tools (such as diagrams and charts) are less than useful for children who learn in non-traditional ways. Nevertheless, the numerous benefits are worth the effort.

Here are 10 tips and ideas for beginning your conversation:

1. **Use pictures as often as you can.** Photos of family or friends can be a springboard for talking about relationships and social interactions. These give important and immediate context to your discussions, which is key for these children who have success with concrete ideas.
2. **Use repetition in providing small amounts of information over time.** Check that your child understands by asking questions that put the information in a practical context. (What could Cousin Laverna have said?) Use opportunities to repeat key ideas in other settings—for instance, while watching television programs that deal with relationships or sexuality issues.
3. **Draw, copy, or buy a full body drawing or chart.** This is a concrete way to show where body parts are and what they do.
4. **For more involved tasks (such as personal hygiene related to menstruation), try to break down the activity into several steps.** Frequently review the steps with your child and always provide feedback and praise. If you are unsure if your steps are concrete and understandable, write them down and try following them yourself. Did you leave *anything* out? Using a pad or tampon during menstruation or cleaning beneath the foreskin of the penis may seem straightforward, but these activities require several separate steps in a particular order.
5. **Repeat information often, and offer feedback and praise.** Reinforce important concepts frequently.



6. **Practice!** Make sure your child has plenty of opportunities to try out his/her skills.
1. **Use existing resources.** Visit the library and check out books and videos about talking with your kids about sexuality. Also use the World Wide Web.
2. **Network with other parents.** Share your insights and listen to theirs. Involve others by communicating with teachers, coaches, and caseworkers about the topics you are discussing. Share ways they can reinforce these lessons at school, work, or on the playing field.
3. **Recognize and validate your child's feelings.** This is a unique opportunity to get to know your child better.
4. **Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know the answer to that question."** But, be sure to follow up with, "Let's find out together!" Then do so.

There is no single approach that is always best. As a parent, you have the opportunity to investigate and experiment, to be creative and to learn from your successes as well as your missteps!

Recommended Resources:

- *Positive Approaches: A Sexuality Guide for Teaching Developmentally Disabled Persons* (1991)
- *Talking Sex! Practical Approaches and Strategies for Working with People Who Have Developmental Disabilities When The Topic is Sex* (1999)

To purchase these publications, contact Planned Parenthood of Tompkins County's Education Department at 607.273.1526, ext. 134.

**The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of Advocates for Youth.*