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**Subject:** To Skip the 'Talk' About Sex, Have an Ongoing Dialogue

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To Skip the 'Talk' About Sex, Have an Ongoing Dialogue  
By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN

Remember that proverbial parent-child talk about the birds and the bees?

The prevailing thinking among child-development experts is that this "talk" should actually be a dialogue that starts as soon as the child can speak and continues until the child reaches young adulthood.

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Recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics say that if we wait until our kids are in their early teens or even middle school to talk about sex, we've waited way too long. Elizabeth Bernstein explains why on The News Hub.

"The notion that we are supposed to have one talk about the birds and the bees and be done with it is a myth," says L. Kris Gowen, a developmental psychologist and senior research associate at Portland State University in Oregon.

Many parents know exactly what they want to tell their children about sex, and how and when. The American Academy of Pediatrics says by age 10, a child should have learned about human sexuality, including the changes of puberty and normal development, the correct names of body parts and differences between males and females. These chats should be age-appropriate, of course. But if parents wait until the early teens-or even middle school-to tell their kids the facts of life, they have waited too long.

Parents of young children find it increasingly difficult to shield children from explicit sexual topics, whether it is the latest public-figure sex scandal, a jeans billboard with a half-naked model 10 stories tall, or Internet pornography.

By talking to their children, whatever they decide to say, parents can convey their values, childhood development experts say. "The one thing that you can do that no one else can do is share your values," says Amy Lang, founder of Birds+Bees+Kids, a Seattle company that helps parents and others learn how to talk to children about sex. "And the payoff is huge: The more information kids have, the better decisions they make."

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Sex education remains controversial on the state and local level. Currently it is required in 21 states, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a reproductive-health think tank that favors comprehensive sex education. A 2007 report by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a nonprofit group in Washington, D.C., evaluated programs aimed at preventing teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections and found the more information kids got, including information about abstinence, the less likely they were to have sex. "Research shows that the more kids learn, the less likely they are to have sex," Dr. Gowen says.

Some people advocate abstinence-only programs, which teach kids to wait for sex and often focus on the risks of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. In 2007, a study by Mathematica Policy Research, of Princeton, N.J., a social-policy research firm, indicated

that abstinence-only programs had no overall impact on teens' sexual activity and rates of unprotected sex.

But what do we say? "Don't worry if you don't have the answers," says Deborah Tolman, professor of social welfare and psychology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, the City University of New York. One of the most honest things you can say to a child is that you don't have the answer, she says.

Even Ms. Lang found out she didn't know how to phrase the discussion a few years ago, when her son was seven. She showed him a book about sex written for kids called "What's the Big Secret?" He looked at a drawing of a man in bed on top of a woman and asked: "So, how long do you have to lie there like that?" Ms. Lang's answer? "Uhhmmm... Two minutes? Two hours? It just depends."

"I felt completely unprepared," says Ms. Lang, who has since written her own book about talking to kids about sexuality, love and relationships. She learned how to have an ongoing dialogue with her son, now 11, sometimes using news stories as a jumping-off point.

Children who feel able to talk to their parents about sex are more likely to talk with them about other things. When her daughter, Arden, was in third grade, Kim Estes, 44, a Redmond, Wash., mom, sat on her bed and they read a book together called "Where Did I Come From?" A few days later, Arden had some questions, including, "How often do you and Daddy do this?" Ms. Estes tried to be honest: "We did it a whole lot when we were trying to have you," she said.

Arden is now 14, and the two have discussed puberty, healthy relationships and birth control. At bedtime one evening this summer, Arden told her mother, "I have something to tell you," and started crying. She said she'd gone on a chat site for teens, started writing to a boy she'd never met and gave him her cellphone number. The two had exchanged 900 text messages.

Ms. Estes, who talks to parents about child safety and sex abuse, had Arden show her the website and the text messages. Then she told her daughter about the dangers of connecting with strangers online, and her daughter promised not to do it again. "I really think that first conversation about the birds and the bees opened the door for her to feel that she can come talk to me about anything," says Ms. Estes.

"I knew my mom was ask-able," Arden says. "She was calm during the sex talk."

Kids also need to know about the social and emotional components. Starting when they are toddlers, experts say, they should learn the correct, clinical words for body parts. Parents can explain what constitutes safe and unsafe touching, and what happens during pregnancy and birth.

Children this young may have questions about same-sex couples ("Why does Johnny have two mommies?"). Parents may want to explain that families come in different shapes and sizes, Dr. Gowen says.

Parents of kids ages 5 to 8 should continue to clarify facts. It's also time to start talking about the changes that will occur in puberty. And Ms. Lang recommends by about age 8 or 9 having a discussion about pornography. "Give them a heads up that sometimes people look at videos and pictures of naked people on the Internet and that this is not OK for kids," Ms. Lang says.

Kids ages 9 through 12 should get more information about puberty and learn what changes the opposite sex will experience, as well. Also talk about how, eventually, they will discover how a sexual relationship can be good and how it can be dangerous. You should communicate your values about sex.

Once your child is a teenager, the focus shifts from the nuts and bolts to in-depth talks about values. You should discuss dating, romantic life and what a healthy relationship is. Continue to talk about safe sex and explain to kids how to protect themselves from both pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Teens who are taught about risks and how to avoid them tend to wait longer before starting to have sex, and they have fewer partners when they do become sexually active, some experts say.

Parents of teenagers can ask them questions, to get them thinking critically about sex. What do other students at school do? What do you think of this? When is a person ready for sex?

As teens get older, the talk should focus more on relationships. Both boys and girls need to hear from their parents about casual sex, peer pressure and how to resist it, date rape and how to be respectful in a relationship.

Parents should talk to teens about sexting-and remind them that a sexually explicit text message isn't private and could be illegal. And they should talk more about pornography. "Talk to them about why you don't like it: It's unnatural and unloving," Portland State's Dr. Gowen says.

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