



# How to be an Askable Adult

## Assumptions

- Sexuality is a normal part of human life and loving.
- Bodies are good and beautiful, private and our own.
- Normal changes happen as we grow, develop, and age.
- Sexual health education should be lifespan education that covers a variety of topics at different phases of life.
- Guardians know their kids best and are their primary sexuality educators.

## What is age appropriate?

### **Actual names of external body parts of all genders.**

→ When kids learn other body parts.

### **What makes a good friend/healthy and unhealthy relationship characteristics.**

→ When kids start having friends.

### **Consent and bodily autonomy.**

→ When kids can initiate hugs, share toys, etc.

### **Emotions—naming and expressing them appropriately and regulating ourselves.**

→ Beginning around preschool.



### **Different ways families are made.**

→ Beginning around preschool.

### **Setting and maintaining boundaries & respecting others' boundaries.**

→ Beginning around K-2nd grade.

### **Puberty—if they are old enough to experience puberty they are old enough to learn about it.**

→ 3-4th grade through high school.

### **Pregnancy and STIs, prevention.**

→ No later than middle school.

### **“Secret touch” through domestic and sexual abuse.**

→ Starting around preschool and progressing through adulthood.

### **Effective, compassionate communication.**

→ Beginning in preschool, continuing through adulthood.

Robie H. Harris, author of *It's Not the Stork* and *It's So Amazing*, writes,

“The bottom line is that **sex education is a health issue**. It's all about what we, the adults, can do to help keep our kids and teens healthy.

One thing we can do is to educate our young children, kids, and teens, and educate them well.

**Education can be the best prevention, but only if we are honest.”**



# What if...

## ***... a kid asks hard, embarrassing questions—or if I don't know all the answers?***

Many of us didn't get great information about sex and sexuality, so it's absolutely normal not to know the answers—and to worry about that.

It's OK to say we don't know and that we will get back to them.

It's OK to find the answer and continue the conversation later. This builds trust. Carers can even teach older youth how to find information and how to determine which websites are trusted sources of information.

Even if we're embarrassed it's important to answer questions honestly. Model working through the embarrassment. This is how kids will learn to have important conversations with healthcare workers, caregivers, future partners or kids, social workers, or even police throughout their lives.

## ***... I don't know what is age- or developmentally appropriate?***

It is important that children who have 6-year-old bodies have information about concepts appropriate for 6 year olds. The same goes for 18-year-old bodies and 65-year old bodies. We should not withhold information about the importance of mammograms or colonoscopies from people over 50, and we should not withhold information about consent, reproductive wellness, and intimacy from people of other ages.

There are resources that provide specific guidelines for youth between kindergarten and 12th grade, and this provides a great framework for what is appropriate at various ages for children and youth. (on the resource list.)

The books we recommend on the resource page on our website also model age-appropriate ways to talk about a variety of topics.



***... a kid talks to others about topics their adults don't think are appropriate?***

This is an age-old concern. However, people are just as likely to talk about inaccurate information. It is better that they are sharing affirming, fact-based information.

***... I find out something embarrassing about a kid I care for—or they find out something embarrassing about me?***

It is OK to set personal boundaries. Teaching people how to create, maintain, and respect personal boundaries is part of this education.

It is OK to talk about the difference between what is okay to share publicly or in private.

Sometimes uncomfortable things happen. It is important for caregivers to react without shame—and without shaming those they care for.

This is also a great time to talk about the difference between privacy and secrets. It's okay to keep a secret about something like a surprise party or present, but an adult asking a kid to keep a secret about other things might not be okay.

***... I don't think they'll respond to it well.***

This is understandable, AND it is a caregiver's job to educate those they care for in an honest, affirming, age-appropriate way.

Sometimes kids react very strongly when adults bring up information about sexual health, even when they are answering a question the kid has asked. As long as you are answering only what they ask and not trying to embarrass them, you are not harming them.

If they have a strong negative reaction, this is a great opportunity to find out what that negative reaction is grounded in. Affirm them and their feelings AND invite them into curiosity with you.



It is also important to make sure you understand what the young person is really asking. Once you understand a question, use language and examples that will resonate with the person. If they become distressed:

- Ask if they want to take a break.
- Ask what is making them anxious and address that.
- Show them part of a book or website that has the information in it and invite them to come to you with questions once they've had some time to ponder on their own for a while.

### ***... I'm uncomfortable talking about "sex stuff"?***

If we want the people we support to be comfortable in their own bodies and minds, we have to model working to be comfortable in our own body and mind.

Knowledge and practice give people the tools they need to ask important questions, provide important answers, set personal boundaries, and recognize potentially abusive behaviors. Practice also helps us, as caregivers, get more comfortable with "sex stuff."

We already have the skills to talk about lots of challenging things that don't necessarily have anything to do with sexuality: sharing, kindness even when it is hard, the importance of honesty, consequences, recognizing and affirming differences, etc. These also CAN relate to sexuality, so just be thoughtful and courageous and use the skills you already have!

### ***... I don't want to teach or encourage kids to have sex?***

Sex ed does NOT promote promiscuity. It DOES give people information about their own bodies, decision-making skills, and communication skills that serve a person for life.



It is a fact that some youth will engage in sexual activities. It has been true as long as there have been people. It is important to listen to youth and address where they are, provide resources so they can be as safe as possible, and maintain open lines of communication so they can share if they need help without fearing you.

In addition, studies show that youth who receive responsible, inclusive, age-appropriate sexual health education are more likely to postpone sexual activity, to use contraception more effectively when they do become sexually active, and have healthier relationships.

***... it's important that the person I support understands family values, and I don't think that sexual health education works with that?***

Values are at the center of who a person is as a sexual being, and they are at the center of the decisions people make about sexual behavior. Responsible, inclusive sexual health education reinforces that.

If we teach only values and no content, the folx we care for are vulnerable to disinformation and manipulation.



# Receiving and Answering Questions

- Ask questions for clarification and discuss their answers and yours rather than simply talking at them–this should be a conversation that encourages curiosity.
- Invite kids to share what they just learned. Teaching is a great way to learn, and this also is a good way to check for their understanding.
- Reinforce consent practice whenever it comes up, whether related to sex or not.
- Encourage kids to use self-regulation skills and model self regulation yourself.
- Talk about how the topic relates to our personal boundaries.
- Talk about what to do if our personal boundaries change.
- Talk about when it is best to change our boundaries (not in the heat of the moment because we suddenly want to do/have something).
- Provide opportunities for kids to practice being upstanders and allies.
- Provide opportunities for kids to practice advocating for themselves (for example, encouraging their pediatrician to engage directly with them and asking them to help out with the pre-appointment paperwork)
- Talk about what to do when others are not receptive to their needs.

Some questions we can ask ourselves before engaging in sexual topics with our children are:

- What's the value of this topic?
- How does this relate to friendship and family relationships across the lifespan?
- How does this relate to grown-up romantic and sexual relationships?
- How does this relate to teaching young kids about the world around them?



# Ways to Share Information

- Actually talking with a child or youth.
- Reading books together that answer questions.
- Leaving trusted books around the house for them to pick up and put down when they want to engage.
- Looking up information together online and talking about what resources can be trusted and which might be questionable.
- Leaving a journal somewhere you both can access it and encouraging them to write any questions or hard things they are facing that they might have a hard time bringing up with you. If you do this, though, **you MUST remember to check** the book **and address** what is in it, preferably by creating time and space for a conversation.



# Resources

## ***RISE: Healthy for Life***

Resources and local workshops for all ages.



## ***SIECUS***

National Sex Education Standards:  
Core Content and Skills



## ***PBS***

Strategies for Teaching Kids  
Self-regulation



## ***Amaze***

Videos–Watch with kids, educate  
yourself!

