



Talking with kids about their

BODY AND SEXUALITY





BODY AND SEXUALITY

Dennis (6 years old) has lately become very much interested in his body. He likes to look at his body in the bathroom mirror and surprises you one morning with this question.

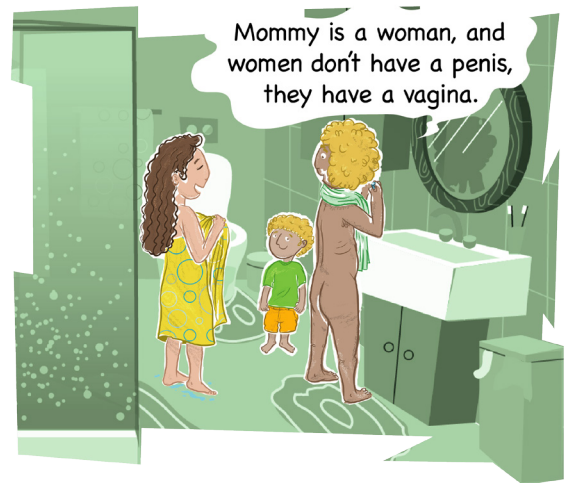
Who has not ever been taken by surprise by such a direct question? Many parents feel inhibited or embarrassed when, in daily life together, the issue of sexuality comes up. Yet, for the sake of the physical development of every child, it is important that parents talk openly about the subject. The continuous sharing of information with children from an early age on contributes greatly to their enhanced self-esteem: those who know and appreciate their body will also protect it. Thus, an open dialog about the subject of sexuality encourages children to define themselves and to pay attention to their own needs. Moreover, it empowers them to develop into self-confident, free members of our society.

Sexuality means different things for different age groups. When discussing this topic, it is incumbent on the parents to continuously determine and adjust the content of their talks according to their childrens' level of maturity and needs. The fact that different aspects of love, lust and physicality are openly discussed and questions truthfully answered without avoiding the topic does not awaken sexual feelings or needs in children. Sexuality is a kind of life energy which is inherent in every human being, and by discussing the subject openly you promote a healthy development of your children.

How would you react in this situation? Select one of the possible reactions and go on reading on the indicated page:



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The genital organ of a man is a penis, women have different genitals. The genital organ outside of the woman's body is called vulva, and the vagina is hidden inside the body. This is also the way...



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Here you will find some important suggestions for a dialog with your children

- Begin early to involve your child in conversations about love, the human body and relationships. If both parties are accustomed to talk about the subject, it reduces the inhibitions which many experience when discussing this topic.
- Ensure that your choice of vocabulary and your answers to questions are age- appropriate. Using familiar word choice when describing genitalia for young children is fine, but older ones from primary school on should absolutely be familiar with explicit terms like “penis“ and “vagina“ as well as “sexual intercourse“. Younger children are often not interested in details and might also be overburdened.
- Make sure that you understand the questions correctly. Mommy, where do I come from? – Does the child want to know your place of residence, or does he/she want to know where babies come from?
- Be honest! If you don't know the answer to a question or if you are unable to explain certain words about the topic of sexuality, admit it and assure your children that you will find the information to answer their question later.
- Prepare a response, so as to be ready to react to your child's questions at inopportune moments. If your child should ask you in the supermarket: „Mommy, does this woman also have a vagina?“, postpone the talk to later, maybe at the house: „Good question, let's talk about it at home, ok? Right now we're shopping.“
- Engage your child in talks while doing daily chores, like tidying up, cleaning or washing dishes. This way the topic of conversation becomes more commonplace and both parties have the opportunity to concentrate on their activities without necessarily having to look their conversation partner in the eye. Thus, talking about topics that may be embarrassing to a person may become easier.

Additional information/ materials/ videos can be found here:

PDF „How to talk to your children about sex and relationships“

http://www.publichealthnetwork.cymru/files/2614/4359/8957/Factsheet1_HowToTalkChildrenAboutSRE.pdf

Parent-child-online course for the information and education of 9-13 year old children. 5-week course with films, role play and other activities.

<http://timeforthetalk.com/>

Text with information: When do I say what? Including film with relevant tips for the topic.

<https://www.familylives.org.uk/advice/primary/health-and-development/how-to-talk-to-your-child-about-sex/>



Alas, such a topic cannot be simply avoided or «silenced away». Human communication functions according to certain rules. Among others, one of these rules stipulates that we cannot not communicate. Read more about the basics of human communication on [page 9](#).

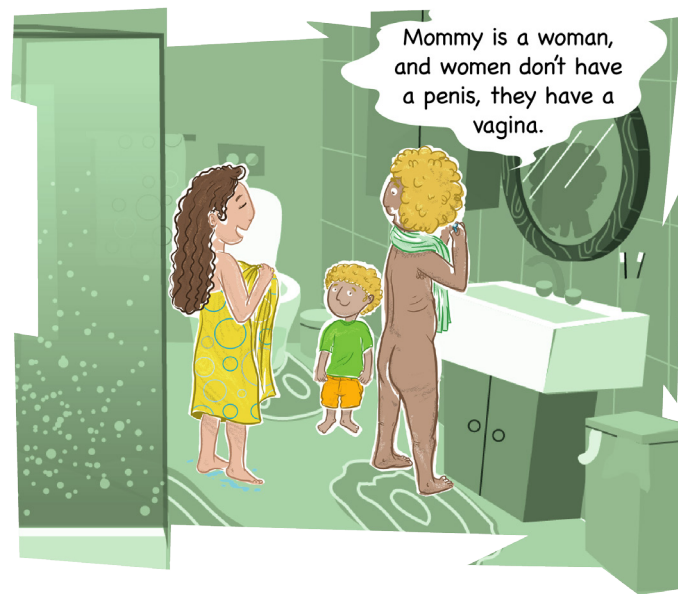
Silence is therefore also a message. In this case, you communicate (although expressed non-verbally): «we don't talk about and have no words for corporeality. Whatever you feel and would like to know about your body, it is up to you to find out by yourself.» This message may, in the long-term, disrupt the trusting relationship between you and your son. Sooner or later, Dennis will find out that in films, advertising or among friends, the topic of sexuality is indeed very much discussed. He might feel that he was not taken seriously or even betrayed by his parents who did not want to discuss this subject with him.

Thus, Dennis obtains information about the subject from other sources which are beyond the absolute control of his parents and they are unable to find out exactly what he knows and does not know about the subject of sexuality.

Sexual development is language development as well.

In discussing the parts of the body with your children, you impart them with words which enable them to talk about this aspect of life. If children learn to talk about the body and genitalia in an entirely natural fashion, it also facilitates the conversation about sexuality. Thus children acquire little by little a vocabulary to express their own questions, feelings and needs in pertinent language. In so doing, they become more competent for their later life, as those who can express themselves well are more successful in obtaining what they want.

You should also discuss descriptions and words which your children may bring home from school. Since children's vocabulary pertaining to the body and sexuality develops over time, not every apparent vulgarity voiced by your child should be considered as a sign of immediate provocation and brutalization. Categorize vulgar expressions such as «fucking» with your children and provide them with terms that you would rather use.

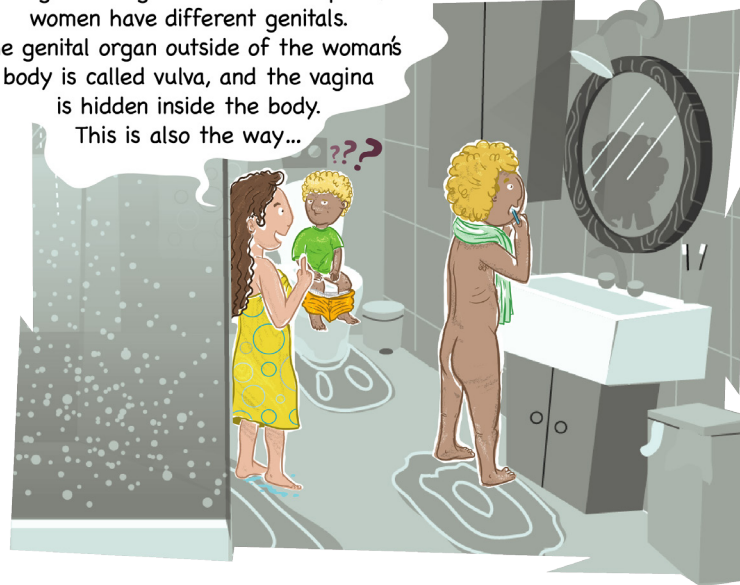


You reacted splendidly in this situation! You responded to Dennis' question and explained things in an age-appropriate manner. Dennis is content with the answer. When he has further questions, he will probably turn to you as his reference person and ask you questions in full confidence.

Dennis learns that the body is not a taboo zone, and that it is possible to talk about it entirely normally.

Your approving of his natural curiosity is the best foundation for a healthy development of his sexuality.

The genital organ of a man is a penis,
women have different genitals.
The genital organ outside of the woman's
body is called vulva, and the vagina
is hidden inside the body.
This is also the way...



Provide your child with short, clear answers; this is already enough for most children. They want immediate answers for things that may preoccupy them at the moment. A child who wanted to know more would continue to ask and show that he is ready to learn more about the subject.

Very detailed and purely biological answers are not appropriate for children of this age group. Since they are not yet able to imagine many things, they would be overburdened by too many details.

- Dennis does not comprehend his mother's answer and consequently does not feel understood either. This does not lead to more trust in the parent-child relationship; on the contrary, Dennis is being discouraged by her incomprehensible answer. In the worst case, everything bodily-related remains a complicated riddle, and he does not dare to talk further about this subject with her.



Sex education cannot begin early enough; experts even talk about facts of life education «from birth». Certainly, sexuality means different things, depending on the maturity and age level of a child. That being considered, it is possible to discuss sexuality with children of any age. The most important thing is to address the subject in an age-appropriate manner. In the following you will find some hints for different age groups:

0-2 years: Babies are born with an innate need for bodily contact and tenderness. They experience the world, guided by this need. Infants from the age of 3 months on smile or appear particularly cheerful when they stimulate themselves. Do not be surprised: even very small boys can have an erection.

Important for living together: Physical attention is the most important factor for a positive development of your child: tender caressing, cuddling and affectionate words let your children experience their own body and provides them with a feeling of security and reliability.

2-4 years: There is a growing interest in bodily secretions. Where do «pee» and «poo» come from? Children notice gender differences and many ask questions already about sex. They want to explore their body and compare it with those of others.

Important for living together: Please name the genitals. This way, children learn to express themselves and ask questions. Words like «penis» or «vagina» can be used in everyday vocabulary without being unpleasant for the children. Provide your children with adequate places of retreat for «playing doctor» activities; sexual curiosity is part of a healthy development.

5-8 years: Questions about pregnancy, conception and prevention appear at the forefront. The children should also be prepared for the onset of puberty, as menstruation for many girls begins at the age of 8 or 9 years already.

Important for living together: Explain the sex act in a childlike way, but honestly: “Babies grow in Mommy’s tummy. For this purpose, Daddy’s penis must go into Mommy’s vagina. A tiny seed from the penis combines with an egg in Mommy’s tummy and a baby grows from it!” Be prepared that your child will find that funny or may react to it with disgust. Show understanding. Relevant books can be helpful to enhance and support such a conversation.

9-11 years: At this age, children have already acquired an extensive knowledge about the topic of sexuality.

Important for living together: Children in this age group do not readily admit their own ignorance about this issue. Inquire about what your child knows and does not know and fill in any knowledge gaps. Take advantage of this opportunity to correct any misconceptions and wrong information your child may have acquired. Ideally, children will open up and ask you questions about issues and matters that they are most concerned about at the moment.

This leads to establishing trust and a feeling on the part of the child: I can ask my parents about anything that interests me.

«The child's sexual development is characterized by experiences and events which, strictly speaking, are not of a sexual nature: closeness, love, physical contact by significant others make a decisive contribution to children's feeling at ease in their bodies and their establishing of appropriate boundaries to avoid things they do not like. Those who feel secure will also deal self-confidently with their own sexuality.»¹

Generally speaking: The more frequently the subject of sexuality is talked about, the more natural and relaxed you will feel when discussing the topic!

Foundations of human communication

Let's accept the following definition of communication: Every communication is a message between a sender and a receiver. Children and parents can be both senders (persons who want to communicate something) or receivers (persons who receive a message).

- You cannot not communicate. Even when we are silent and avoid eye contact with other persons we send a message: "Leave me alone, I want to be on my own!" Moreover, babies and toddlers can and want to communicate with us. They do it in a nonverbal way and thus it is often more difficult to understand for their parents. Likewise, very young children try to express their feelings, needs and will. To ensure a successful and satisfying communication process with our children, it is important that we try hard to decode and understand their nonverbal communication efforts.
- There are symmetrical and complementary communicative situations. Symmetrical implies a communication between equal partners: friends, brothers and sisters or colleagues ; complementary communication is based on unequal relationships, such as between teachers and students, employers and employees, parents and children. These relationships are defined by power structures whereby a person in a position of power may exert pressure over another person. Naturally, it is easier to communicate from a position of power, such as our parent-position. But care must be taken that we do not abuse this power as otherwise communication may yield poor results and with negative consequences for the relationship with our children. Children are always in a subordinate position when communicating with their parents. They cannot get out of it.
- The punctuation of the communicative process: The sender and the receiver structure the communication flow differently and thus interpret their own behavior during the communicative process as merely a reaction to the other's behavior (every partner believes that the other one is the cause of a specific behavior). To punctuate a communication means to interpret an ongoing sequence of events by labeling one event as the cause and the subsequent event as the response (if one thing happens, something else always occurs).

„Talking with kids about their body and sexuality” is based on the following references:

¹ Landolt, Claudia und Claudia Marinka. 2016. «Wenn die Sexualität erwacht.» *Das Schweizer Elternmagazin Fritz und Fränzi*, Dezember, 2. retrieved 29.11.2017.

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