

AGES
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Let's talk reasons why parents should talk about bodies, puberty and reproduction

- **All children need to know.** All children need to know about their growing and changing bodies. They need to learn the proper names for their private body parts; learn how babies are conceived, grow and develop; understand the changes of puberty, feel comfortable talking about their feelings and know about body safety and their rights and responsibilities as individuals. Learning these things is a basic human right and helps keep children safe in a world where they're exposed to information that's often beyond their development. If we keep children ignorant, we're not protecting their innocence but leaving them vulnerable to powerful influences from outside the family. Age-appropriate information helps build confidence and reduce the shame and awkwardness that can develop if these topics are avoided.
- **Helps them make safe and healthy choices.** By talking to our children, we're letting them know that it's okay to ask questions and share ideas. Talking builds knowledge and helps them make safe and healthy choices based on facts - not misinformation. How else can they work out what's right or wrong for them, healthy or unhealthy, safe or unsafe and so on? We need information to be able to make the best decisions for ourselves that we can.
- **Most children are curious.** Children know a lot more than we think they do; they hear information in the playground, from siblings, friends, the media, and online. It's normal to be curious. Parents can help children frame what they hear and see in developmentally appropriate ways. Because most children are curious, we want them to talk to a trusted adult - otherwise we risk them going to the

internet for information, a peer, or another person who may not have their best interests at heart. We want them to come to us as parents and receive trustworthy information in school - not go to Google.

- **Helps develop respect and empathy.** It's normal to have a large range of feelings about changing bodies, and having a supportive and empathetic group of peers can make going through puberty much easier. The more educated young people are, the more likely they are to be sensitive and understanding of the feelings and self-consciousness of others around them. Also, don't forget to talk about diversity; it's a great chance to share ideas and values and give children the opportunity to ask questions.
- **Helps to manage puberty.** The biggest question young people ask as their bodies start to develop is: 'Am I normal?' Young people need to know about development during puberty so they understand what happens, and can talk about ways to manage the changes. It's important they know about the physical changes, but also the social and emotional changes too. And it's critical to have regular 'check ins' and chats, so that we send a clear message that talking and asking questions is okay, even if it's embarrassing, even if it's about bodies. Feeling embarrassed is not a reason not to talk to a trusted adult if we need to.
- **Children and sexual messages.** In today's digital world, children are saturated with sexual messages. Talking often helps young people process and understand what is seen. We can help them process messages they're exposed to every day, such as billboard advertisements, and things they see in television and movies. If we can break information down into age-appropriate chunks and engage in conversations with them, where we share our ideas, expectations and values, and ask them what they in turn think, this helps them develop the critical facility of challenging messages they hear in the world, not always believing everything they hear or see, thinking for themselves if something is ok or not, healthy or not, safe or not. By becoming critical consumers in this way, they process for themselves the things they hear and see in the world and from other people. Parents and other family members are a vital link here, to have these incidental conversations when watching a film together, or reading a book, or there's something in the news. All of this is material to be processed by children, and they need support in doing so.

For further reading, check our resources on our website www.sexeducationaustralia.com.au

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- **Helps protect against sexual abuse.** By talking about bodies and teaching body safety, we give children the confidence to ask questions and tell us if something happens. Child sex offenders target children who are ignorant and shy about their bodies, as well as children who don't have strong, open relationships with their parents. Children who use the proper names for private body parts send the message that they know about bodies and that someone has taught them, which means they will likely tell a trusted adult if something happens. Parents need to be clear that talking about bodies is okay and that children should never be asked to keep secrets about anything, especially about touching or seeing private parts. Parents need to talk with their child about who their trusted adults are.
- **The human body is amazing.** Learning about the human body is interesting and important and a part of science. We need to normalise talking about the reproductive system just as we would talk about the digestive, immune or cardiovascular system. Talking and learning reduces embarrassment, makes it easier to talk and avoids the shame that's historically centered around learning about these things. Shame keeps people quiet, whereas talking about these topics strengthens relationships - if you can talk about this, you can talk about anything!

Conversation starters (try one of these openers to get the chat going):

'I'm wondering what you know about puberty? Can you tell me?'

'Do you remember we've talked about body safety; what do you remember?'

'I want to talk to you about something that's important for all children to learn. We're going to call it body safety. What do you think it might be about?'

'Do you think younger kids tell their parents everything? Do you think kids your age tell their parents everything? Why/why not?'