

Talk Early, Talk Often: Ideas for speaking to your kids about sex

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When was the last time you spoke with your child about keeping their body safe? Often times, parents put off answering questions or bringing up the topic of sex because it makes us as adults feel uncomfortable. Sex education should start much earlier than when our kids ask the direct, tough questions, though. As both a parent and a professional, I urge families to discuss basic body safety with their children starting as soon as they are able to identify and label their own body parts. No, don't explain the details of conception to your three-year-old ☺ – simply start with basic body knowledge and then build from there as your child grows and inquires on his or her own. Teaching your child to name his or her body parts correctly is the first, and most important, step – would you ever teach your child that his/her hand is instead called a “ha ha”?? This sounds silly, right? Just like a hand, a foot and a nose are body parts, so are your children's private body parts. Start basic sex education by simply calling their butt, penis, and/or vagina exactly what they are! There is no need to make up words – kids need to know the actual names for the parts of their body.

Once children know the names of their body parts, it's time to start having simple, short and easy conversations with them about who is allowed to touch their private parts. Once children are out of diapers and bathing themselves (or at least trying to), it becomes a more black-and-white conversation. This list is short and only includes 1) themselves 2) their pediatrician and 3) a parent (**but only if the child asks the parent to look at something that may hurt**). Children need to hear that it is ok for them to touch themselves – as I tell kids, “you need to wash your body and you need to go to the bathroom – both of which require touching your private parts.” Aside from hygiene, kids need to hear that body exploration on their own is ok, as long as he or she is alone in their own room by themselves – sticking hands down pants in public or at the dinner table isn't ok!

Just as we teach kids how to prevent fires, we also teach them what to do in case a fire does occur, despite trying to prevent one. Therefore, not only do we need to teach kids who is allowed to touch them, it's also very important to teach our kids what to do if their body is touched by someone who isn't on the “approved” list. Your child needs to hear that she or he can always tell you if someone tries to and/or does touch their body and that your child will never be in trouble for telling you. Children need to know that just as a fire is unlikely to happen in your home, being inappropriately touched is also unlikely, but knowing what to do “just in case” is of utmost importance. Keeping kids safe is the most basic foundation of my job as a professional as well as your job as a parent. Despite our best efforts; however, it is impossible to watch our children 24 hours a day. Therefore; we need to arm them with the knowledge of ways to keep themselves safe as well as the comfort of knowing that even when things are hard, their parents are there to support, listen and help them.