

Talking to Children and Youth with Diverse Abilities about Sexuality: Tips for Parents and Caregivers

What does healthy sexuality mean?

Sexuality is about physical, social and emotional development. It includes:

- Gender roles, identities and sexual orientation
- Body image
- Relationships
- How we grow and change
- Our bodies and how they work
- Personality, communication, expression and values

Sexuality is not static; it changes as someone grows and moves through different life stages. Children develop their sense of self, including gender identity, as they observe others around them and begin to learn about relationships and boundaries.

GOOD TO KNOW: Sexuality is an important part of the overall wellness of all people, including those with diverse abilities. Children and youth with diverse abilities experience the physical, emotional and social changes of growing into a healthy adult in the same ways as their typically developing or able bodied siblings and peers.

Talking with children and youth about sexuality helps them develop healthy boundaries, build skills and stay safe. Answering questions and talking honestly about sexuality helps children feel comfortable and supported to talk about growing up, relationships and feelings.

Development notes:

Puberty is the process of changing from a child to an adult. It does not happen overnight and can continue until age 20. It can start anytime from 8 years of age with physical changes such as breast growth, pubic and body hair, menstruation and wet dreams. Emotional changes such as mood swings and social changes like changes in friendship groups and relationships with family are all part of adolescence and puberty. Every child is different and changes at the rate that's right for them.

Puberty is sometimes called **adolescence** and is an important life stage as children grow into adults. Teens may explore relationships, dating and intimacy as they prepare to make important life decisions. They may want more freedom and independence which can be exciting and scary at the same time. As they develop relationships, their sexual orientation may emerge. All youth, no matter their orientation, need a safe place to ask questions and to know that they are loved. There is support out there for youth and parents who have questions about sexual orientation and gender identity.

Parent tip: Each child is unique in their strengths and challenges and will need individual strategies to meet their needs. The best sexuality education happens when families and service providers work together. Involve your child's teachers and caregivers and share skills you are developing e.g., practicing personal space and boundaries.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Q: *My child has a physical disability. We have so many areas of everyday living to deal with, so sexuality does not seem important.*

A: Parenting a child with a disability every day can be a challenge! Parents who have decided to add sexuality education to the life skills they teach their children are often surprised at how well it goes. It is very tough if you are trying to navigate basic skills such as toileting and then you have to add on teaching that same child about menstruation. Teaching personal care skills can provide good opportunities to teach about sexuality including boundaries like safe touch and consent.

Q: *My youth has a severe learning disability. How can I expect her to understand something as complex as sexuality?*

A: As a parent of a youth with a disability, you are probably already very creative. Try to choose material that will suit your child/youth. You may need to use flash cards, videos, cartoons and in lots of cases hands on learning (e.g., teaching about hygiene during puberty). Think about topics in small pieces, such as private and public spaces or building friendships.

Q: *My child is overly affectionate to everyone and I feel this may put her at risk. How do I teach my child about safe boundaries?*

A: Teaching boundaries and personal space helps with safety. Children need clear examples of who they can touch and trust. They may need a pictorial guide to help understand who those people are. Learning about.

RESOURCES

Talking about Sexuality in Canadian Communities www.tascc.ca Designed for parents and providers of children and youth with diverse abilities. Includes key topics including puberty and sexual development, hygiene and self-care, boundaries and dating and intimacy.

Teaching Sexual Health www.teachingsexualhealth.ca Visit the parent section for more information about what to say and when.

Visit your local library to access books to help families, children and parents talk and learn about sexuality.