

what to say about sex

People vary in their attitudes towards sex education for children as young as five or six years. Some argue that it simply encourages early sexual interest resulting in teenage promiscuity, while others argue it encourages a sensitive and sensible attitude towards sex. Evidence from research doesn't help clarify the position, so you will have to exercise your own judgement on this.

However, what we do know from research is that:

- * Even if children are not given sex education by their parents at home or by their teachers in school, they gain sexual information through other sources, typically older children who may themselves have a distorted perspective due to misunderstandings.
- * Children respond best to discussions about sex when they are carried out with familiar adults whom they can trust and relate. That's why it is more effective to involve parents and teachers in the process than to leave it to strangers.
- * Despite their desire to ask mum and dad for information about sex, many children don't because their parents become embarrassed when the matter is raised in conversation – and then the children themselves become embarrassed – leading to the end of the discussion!
- * Both boys and girls prefer to ask their mother for information about sex rather than their father, because mum knows about babies and also because she is generally the parent who is with them during visits to the doctor.

In the end, you'll make up your own mind about the right time to approach sex education with your child. If you want to leave it until your child is older, that's fine. But if you feel inclined to broach the matter at this age – and many parents do – then the following advice may be helpful.

ANTICIPATE HER

QUESTIONS * Children have an amazing ability to ask the

sort of questions that throw adults off track. They are usually uninhibited in their inquiries, so be prepared for anything. Anticipate the possible "Who?" "How?" "Why?" and "When?" questions that she could ask you, and have a reasonable answer available. When you are ready and prepared in this way, you'll be more confident handling the topic.

AVOID SHOWING EMBARRASSMENT * Of course, your face might redden when you start to talk to your child about sex. But you can't really expect your child to develop a mature attitude to sex if you giggle with embarrassment the minute the topic is raised. Make it easy for yourself by discussing sex with your partner beforehand until you are sure that you feel comfortable saying the words.

ANSWER APPROPRIATELY * Always pitch your answers at a level your child can understand. Don't go into unnecessary detail unless she specifically wants that. Of course, it all depends on her level of maturity, understanding and background knowledge.

One six-year-old might be fascinated by the ins-and-outs of the male and female reproductive systems, about eggs and sperm, whereas another child might be confused by it.

USE BOOKS IF YOU PREFER * Books specifically written for children can provide a good starting point for sex education. These texts can be very useful in answering your child's basic questions. Most books provide basic information on the sex organs, conception and reproduction. The advantage of using books like these with your five-year-old is that they give you a chance to prepare your ideas in advance.

SET SEX IN A LOVING CONTEXT

* Aside from including physical aspects of sexual reproduction, explain that sex occurs within a caring relationship. (Of course, you know sexual intercourse frequently occurs in a casual non-loving relationship, but that should be left until your child is much older.) Sexual discussions should always be set in the context of a loving partnership. **YP**

