

Introduction

In this section we will discuss the following:

Talking to your child
- Dr. Marie Murray

Being there for your child
- Dr. Tony Bates

**talk
to me**

**TALK
TO ME**

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to me

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me

Talking to your child - Dr. Marie Murray

What is it that makes the conversation between parents and young people about sex so different to every other conversation. So different, that many people think it must happen on a particular day at a particular age?

We don't have the 'crossing the road talk' or whisper with embarrassment "any worries you have about crossing the road, don't be afraid to ask me". No, right from the start we hold their hands because they are too young to understand the danger of passing cars. All through their lives we guide our children and direct them, from toddler to teenager, pedestrian to biker, to rider of bus and driver of car. We show them, by example, the respect that traffic requires.

**Why can't
talking about
'sex' and
'sexuality' be
the same?**



One of the difficulties, perhaps, is that neither parents nor adolescents ever want to think of each other as sexual beings. Adolescents shiver at the thought of their parents having sex. Parents are long since past that!

Parents are equally squeamish. This is the one conversation that they do not know how to begin. They might lack the words to have a comfortable parent-child chat.





This is why the unsaid often becomes the 'badly said', so that phrases like "behave yourself" or "don't get into trouble" become negative and insulting warnings to young people who are already sensitive and uncertain about how to cope. Warnings of this kind assume that the adolescent either already has had sex or is about to start, unless warned of the dangers of pregnancy. This provides no information, no guidelines, no support and a clear message that pregnancy is the only danger in sex.



The unsaid often becomes the 'badly said'

Sex education is not just learning about quick physical acts but about lifelong emotional development, intimate relationships and commitments.

Sex education is about parents being there for adolescents and communicating the true meaning of relationships and sexuality. This is done in the way each parent treats the other and treats young people. It is spoken loudly without words when a father and mother are respectful of each other, are protective and supportive of their son or daughter and challenge inappropriate messages or images about sex.

Sex education is when a parent reminds children who come across certain images on a billboard, on TV, in an advertisement or on the internet that 'relationships' are different to that image. It is shown by how parents talk to each other, talk about each other, talk to and about their children. It is in the films parents watch and allow their family to see.

Sex education says this is how to be a man or a woman in the world. It acknowledges the adolescent stage of life because adolescents are hurt if their transition from childhood is put down or trivialised. Adolescents are sensitive if their manner of dress is ridiculed, if they are accused of doing what they would not do or if they are described in a way that is sexual, offensive or degrading.

We have no idea of what it is like to be an adolescent in the world of today.

Our experiences are not their experiences. We cannot begin any conversation with adolescents unless we realise how much life for them is different from when we were their age and that we can never understand what it is like to be growing up today. The greatest wish most young people express is a wish for respect. They have the right to respect for their youth, respect for their views, respect for what they know and for what they have yet to learn and to be asked what information or support they require at different ages and stages in life.

The adolescent's job is to strive for an independent experience of the world. The parents' job is to keep adolescents safe while they do this. Sometimes adolescents have the skills they need. Sometimes parents must make decisions. Sometimes they can make these decisions together.





Parents guide their children every day in many ways. Sex education is no different. Parents need to trust themselves, tap into their own intuition, value their own knowledge and appreciate their unique sensitivity to their own child.

Sometimes things go wrong, this may require a review of the rules and the adolescent's readiness for responsibility. Because at heart, young people rightly require the regard for their safety that makes rules, draws boundaries, that does not facilitate them engaging in activities they will later regret, and that guides them, not criticises them, particularly if they make mistakes.

It is difficult for things to go wrong when the message to young people is one of love, respect and the wish to keep them safe. How parents communicate and carry out this role with their own children is not contained in a 'talk' but in living. Parents know how to do this.

The rest will follow.



Being there for your child

- Dr. Tony Bates

Bringing children into this life and helping them to find their place in this world is a courageous undertaking.



**What it
means to be a
boy or a girl**

As a parent, you want your child's path to be as smooth as possible and to do all you can to spare him or her needless suffering.

Listening to them talk about their joys and failures, their fears and their dreams, what confuses and bothers them, is a vital part of parenting your child. Simply being there for them in those moments when they want to chat about what's going on helps keep them safe in the world.

Coming to terms with sexuality is one of the main issues facing your child. Your son or daughter needs to gradually figure out what it means to be a boy or a girl. With that comes the awareness of their need to be close to others, to build friendships and to learn to be intimate. Looking back on your own life, you can see that this learning happens gradually over time.

**“ My parents didn't sit down and talk
to me about sex - I wish they had though ”**

- Roberta, age 15



From the first moment you were welcomed and cared for in life, you began learning how to get close and how to avoid getting hurt. Later on, you became aware of yourself as an individual; how you looked, what you liked and didn't like, the kinds of people you were drawn to and the insecurities you felt around others. With guidance, or perhaps with little or no support, you wove these ideas together into a picture of who you are. And it is no different for your child. The only question is, do we leave our children alone to do this work, or do we believe we might have something to offer that may make a difference to them?

You Can Talk to Me is a resource that believes very strongly in what you have to offer your child, particularly in respect to your child's understanding of their sexuality.



The world they live in gives them very mixed messages about how they should feel and behave as young men and women. They are told their natural desires should be expressed, that it's 'cool' to experiment, regardless of their readiness to do so. Mixed messages from peers, the media and with what children think can lead to great confusion and to behaviour they may deeply regret.



Your contribution to their growing understanding is different to any other 'voice' they are exposed to.

You know them personally; you know what they are ready to hear, at any given point in time. In your conversations with them, you give them more than mere information. You help them to fit this information to their lives, to their particular worries and questions that are part of their growing awareness of themselves as sexual beings.

What makes it so hard to open up a discussion about sex with your child? Could it be we're afraid we'll get it wrong? After all, we know this is very important and we wouldn't want to frighten, confuse or shame them. One of the real difficulties for us as parents may be that we have our own memories of how our parents talked to us. That is, if they even tried to. We remember, perhaps, our own embarrassment and sense of cringing, as we were given little booklets to read, or spoken to about sex in such a basic, childish way that we felt deeply uncomfortable.

Some parents now fear that by talking about sex, we may unintentionally encourage our children to engage in sexual behaviour, before they are emotionally ready. By thinking like this they are actually handing their role as parents over to the media, their children's peers, the internet and all the other information systems that have no problem with bombarding children with information and images of a sexual nature on a daily basis.

We don't want to set them on the wrong track, so we play it safe and say nothing. We hope that they will come to sexual knowledge in their own time, in their own way, and when they are ready.



This Resource suggests an approach to communicating that takes some pressure off all concerned. It describes a way of talking to your child throughout the course of their childhood and adolescence. Conversations about sex can begin as soon as their curiosity triggers questions about their own birth or the arrival of newborns into their world. At each point in their development, new opportunities present themselves to add a little more to their understanding of sexual relations.

Rather than feel the subject must be raised in some very formal way, it is easier for you and your child if you allow it to surface naturally and communicate to them that this is a very normal aspect of life. Sex is part of a much larger adventure in forming and growing relationships, and yet we know there are significant hazards in moving too early into sexual intimacy. Healthy sexuality has to do with something that happens between two people, where there is commitment and where both people are emotionally ready to handle the enormous feelings which intimacy uncovers.

Since sexuality is such a powerful gift for deepening the bond between two people, it makes sense that we regard it with some respect. As a parent your courage in confronting this topic can communicate both the wonder of sexuality and the basic right of your child to say "no", until the conditions are right for them to engage in sexual intimacy.

“ It's not something you do in one day, ”
it's something you do everyday.

- Dr Tony Bates