

Have the Talk

We'll help you get the discussion started on the birds and the bees.

BY PRITI SALIAN

If your child is a pre-teen, chances are that she is reading books on romance and has whispered conversations with friends about boyfriends and girlfriends. Simultaneously, she is also imbibing ideas on relationships and sex from the ever-present media. And no doubt she and her friends are decoding the information in their own way. She may be exhibiting other behaviour as well. "Kids in the early adolescent transitions tend to experiment with different attachment-related behaviours, which may include exchanging notes and sitting close to each other. Much of this is a replica of adult relationship patterns that they observe around them," says Geetika Kapoor, a Delhi-based consultant school psychologist.

However, many parents shy away from talking about the birds and the bees, either because they are embarrassed, or because they have no idea where to begin and what to say. Some fear their kids may misuse the information to make fun of the opposite sex about bodily changes, like developing breasts. Many believe their kids are not capable of understanding, are too young or will get confused if spoken to at this age. "But kids know a lot about sex these days and also how to hide this information from their parents when they want to," says Kapoor. "Once they know the facts, they are more likely to behave responsibly and



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respect the opposite sex." Do remember that if you don't have that talk, your child will be going on assumptions. "This way, there is always the risk of someone misleading and taking advantage of your child," explains Kapoor.

HOW to tell your child...

"Your own comfort level in discussing the topic with your child should be your first concern," says Kapoor. If you are used to having chats on issues in general, you're not likely to find it difficult to broach the subject.

Look for cues. Even if your child is talking about something as innocent as how tall he will be, you could use it as a lead-in to having the talk.

Keep all lines of communication open. Avoid cringing at the mention of sex, or changing the channel quickly if you happen see the birthing process on TV with her. The more open you are with your kid, the more comfortable you will be when it comes to talking about the birds and the bees. Allow your child to take the lead when you converse, to find out what's on her mind.

WHEN to tell your child...

Some time during the pre-teen years, preferably by 10 years, as body changes in boys and girls are happening by now.

Consider your child's readiness. If your kid shows curiosity about physical relationships, for example, or asks questions when he sees a man and a woman in an intimate relationship on TV, or talks about having a boyfriend or girlfriend, mentions kissing or any other form of intimacy, he's ready.

Pick the right moment. Broach the subject when you know she is focused and not distracted by another activity.

WHAT to tell your child...

Don't jump into complex issues. Take it step by step, letting your child lead the way once you have introduced the subject.

Talk about body development first. Inform your child about the changes that puberty brings. For a girl, tell her how her body will now change, both from within and from the outside. Explain exactly what to expect from her period, so she is not shocked when she gets it. Reassure her that this is natural and that even boys go through changes. Similarly, tell a boy about

No, it's not wrong; it's natural.

Nocturnal emissions and masturbation are a reality in your tween's life, so it is a good idea to educate them about it once they are about 11 years old. A nocturnal emission is the involuntary release of excessive semen which is formed in a boy's body due to the activity of the growth hormone. This could begin to happen any time between 11 and 14 years.

a girl's development, after you talk about changes in his body, like the appearance of body hair and the cracking of his voice.

Get her comfortable. "A good way would be to tell her that you went through the same experiences when you were her age and that your mom/grandmom/sister had spoken to you in the same way," says Dr. Deepak Gupta, *Child Advisor*. This will not only establish growing up as a positive concept, but even build an instant rapport between you and her.

Talk about the reproductive cycle. This is necessary for both your daughter and son. "Explaining diagrammatically helps, since kids are taught the reproductive system in school at this stage," says Kapoor. Once you are sure your kids have digested this information, you could talk again after a gap.

Do your research. Prepare yourself for questions. For instance, if he asks, "What is sex?" be ready with an answer. Consider keeping it clinical. Simply say, "When a man and woman's genitals meet, there is a discharge from the male, called semen." Go on to explain the process and link it to the reproductive cycle. Use the diagrams in school textbooks to help you along. "Don't hesitate to talk about the consequences of sex to your child once he knows about sex," adds Kapoor.

Buy time when unsure. There will be times when a question like "What is a condom?" is thrown at you. If you are not equipped to answer it immediately, buy time. Tell your child that you are busy doing something else and will come back to her with an answer later. Never give false information. Get back as soon as possible so that your child trusts you as a reliable source of information always. **Q**

Good Ideas If you are at a loss about how to initiate the process of talking to your kids about sex and other related issues, here are some ways to get you started.

Tell as a group You could get a group of your child's friends together and talk about it with the permission of the other moms. Better still, get them involved. This way, it will become an open discussion, without you having to do it alone.

Get the school to reinforce the message "When I hold school workshops for pre-teens, I get anonymous questions about kissing, the right time to have sex, contraception and safe sex from them," says Kapoor. It's a good way for kids to talk openly about it.