

Sex and Sexuality

from a parent's perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

While taking her bath a five year old stands up, then giggles and drapes a washcloth over her crotch saying, "I have to cover my peanuts."

In a kindergarten classroom a group of children sit down to a pretend breakfast. A little girl joins them; reaching under her t-shirt to pull out the baby doll she had placed there. "I just had a baby boy," she says. The others nod and continue their play.

A mom walks through the door carrying a clean pile of pants and socks, surprising two brothers — busy comparing their penises.

What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation. Each issue, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

Roslyn Duffy is the co-author with Elizabeth Crary of *The Parent's Report Card* (Parenting Press) and co-author with Jane Nelsen and Cheryl Erwin of *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers* and *Positive Discipline: The First Three Years* (Prima Press). Roslyn, a 17-year veteran director of a child care program in Seattle, Washington, lectures and teaches classes for both parents and teachers, and is a counselor in private practice. She has four children and three grandchildren. Visit www.RoslynDuffy.com.



– Solution –

It isn't about size

Of the three situations, which one would you most want to avoid? The first one is cute and funny, the second seems rather sweet and endearing, but the third one tiptoes a bit too close to a topic most of us don't like to have to deal with — sexuality. It is one thing to name body parts or even to tell a child that there is a baby growing in mommy's tummy, but when we face having to talk about what people should or should not do with certain body parts, things get awkward.

They notice

One thing is clear from all three examples. Children notice that people have different body parts, and they are curious about how those parts work and why they are different. What do children need to know and when and how do we go about telling them? As with most things — slow but steady is a good approach.

Just the facts, please

There are developmental stages in learning about sexuality. Most of us are either tempted to say nothing or to go overboard with too much information. Move from simple to detailed when describing body parts and functions. (Doo-dah, booby, and wee-wee are not the terms I am referring to here.) For younger children words such as penis, vagina, and breast are fine. If a child says, 'peanuts' repeat the correct word and maybe add, "a boy has a penis and girl has a vagina." Why boys and girls have different parts can be explained in increasing detail, later.

When a child of four or five asks where babies come from, she does not need an advanced biology lesson. Saying, "Babies grow inside their mommys' bodies in a special place called a uterus," covers the facts that she can handle.

The same questions posed by a six year old might need a different answer. "A man's penis places sperm inside a woman's vagina. When the sperm combine

with tiny eggs inside the woman's body, a baby begins to grow."

Still older school-age children can handle additional details — terms such as sexual intercourse, semen, and pubic hair become appropriate information.

What to say?

One mom remembers her shock at realizing that she had not explained menstruation to her 13-year-old daughter. This was a conscientious mom but the years had passed more quickly than she had expected. (Fortunately for both of them, her daughter was a late-bloomer, and their talk managed to precede the event — barely!)

It is easy to let the months or years slip by without sharing necessary information — especially if the topic is one you find embarrassing. This is where *steady* comes in. Making sex less of an unmentionable topic means keeping discussions ongoing. Your nervousness communicates itself. Frequency will help to raise everyone's comfort level. Stay matter-of-fact. "When a boy's penis gets firm it is called an erection." (Yes, even little boys do have them!)

If your child sees a nursing mother, simply saying, "a mother's body makes milk for her baby," is straightforward and conveys respect for this basic act. To say, "It isn't nice to look," or "babies should not be fed in public," supports an attitude of shame, and makes both the act of nursing and the mother and baby seem immoral.

When and how?

When a child asks a question or seems confused about something she sees or hears, use it as a 'teachable moment.'

Watching your little girl attempt to stand while peeing could lead to a discussion of the fact that girls don't have penises but have a vagina instead. Pace information to the curiosity your child shows. If she shows no interest or she covers her ears and says, "Yuck," — back off. Try again later.

Brothers found comparing penises presents a perfect opportunity to engage in a talk about the importance of keeping private parts covered. Include a brief lesson on touching. "A doctor may need to examine your penis, but no one else needs to touch your penis. Touching should never be kept secret, either." (Are you flinching less at the word penis? See, frequency works!)

An early safety lesson, such as the one above, can be inserted into a discussion without causing undue alarm. Sexual abuse is a reality — and it is not only 'stranger danger.' Open discussions will keep adults accessible so that children know they can tell or ask us anything.

Other common ways for conversations to begin are through what is seen or heard in the media, from books, or even something overheard. Start by asking what a child knows or understands. It is important not to assume what a child may know or not know. Fill in needed information and clear up misconceptions. Check on a child's interpretation of information, including your explanations.

Human bodies are beautiful and good. If your family is comfortable with nudity under certain circumstances, explain how those circumstances are unique. It may be fine to step out of the bath and walk down the hall without a towel, but when there are visitors it is not acceptable to do so.

Defining values and differences

Sex education requires real soul-searching. What do you believe is appropriate or not? We can't teach what we can't define. Finding ways to honor your values while teaching children to show respect for others' choices is challenging. Whether your family vacations at a nudist camp or you shudder at so much as a shared bath time — your values are your own and deserve respect. So do others'.

Sexuality and sex education breach the tricky territory of personal values. Each of us makes different choices — including sexual choices — and children will encounter many different lifestyles.

Does your child have a friend being raised by two mommies? How do you explain cousin Frank's 'special' roommate? Some children will grow up to be homosexuals. Does your daughter know that you would still love her if this were the case? Would your son be able to talk to you about it? The more we make sexual development — including differences — safe to talk about, the more reassured children will feel.

Big issues — small steps

Defining values is only one piece of a very large picture. A stroll down the local toy aisle — from pointy-breasted dolls, to preschooler make-up kits, to muscle-bound plastic heroes — provides children with countless sexual images. Is training little girls to see their sexuality as provocative or encouraging little boys to identify with macho-sexual stereotypes what you want for your child? From stumbling over what to call body parts, to far more serious issues, sex is a topic that we can't ignore. When Hasbro announced plans to market dolls based on the *Pussycat Dolls*, a real-life group known for sexualized dance and music, letters

from parents convinced them that such dolls would be inappropriate. Our actions — as well as our words, matter.

Keep at it

Appreciating that men and women, or boys and girls, have sexual parts that are different — that some body parts need to be kept private — and that we need to respect as well as enjoy our bodies, are important lessons. We are sexual beings.

Keep at it. Give your children a healthy foundation of knowledge and encourage open and ongoing conversations. It will get easier, which is a good thing — since those 'show me' bathroom moments are only the beginning.

CHECK IT OUT:

Visit www.ChildCareExchange.com to see what resources are available for you:

Exchange magazine, Exchange Books, Articles on Demand, Classroom Clips, Out-of-the-Box Training Kits, Parenting Exchange, Conference Calendar . . . and more!