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## Let's Talk About Sex



One night, my 5-year-old son told me the story of his creation: "I came from space. First I was there, then I was in your belly, then I came out, and then I grew up." My heart leaped to my mouth. *Don't ask me how you got in my belly*, I silently begged. *And for the sake of all that's holy, don't ask how you got out.*

Thankfully, my son didn't ask. If he had, I would've been tempted to try what many parents resort to when it comes to talking sex with their kids: avoidance. But that's a bad strategy, says John T. Chirban, Ph.D., author of [What's Love Got to Do With It: Talking to Your Kids About Sex](#). "Avoidance tells your child that sex is wrong or silly," he says. Glossing over the truth isn't a great idea either. "In the absence of correct information, kids invent wrong information," says Pepper Schwartz, Ph.D., co-author of [Ten Talks Parents Must Have With Their Children About Sex and Character](#). So you want to be honest -- without freaking kids out. The real-mom questions and expert answers here will help you suss out what's too much info for kids, what's not enough, and what's *just* right.

**Q. "When my then 2 1/2-year-old daughter was showering with her dad, she was right at eye level with his penis. She called it a hot dog and wanted to know why he had one."**

-- Leslie Sebbag, 37, Los Angeles

**A.** Well, you know what? A penis does look a lot like a hot dog, especially to a literal-minded toddler. Acknowledge your child's observation ("Sure does, honey"), then give her the right name for it ("That's Daddy's penis") and explain that penises are what boys have -- and what girls do not. "Just don't be tempted to describe what a penis is for," says Chirban. "It may only upset or confuse her, and it's not what she was asking anyway." Final note: Always use the proper term when referring to *any* anatomical part. "Sexual body parts are the only ones that we make up cutesy names for, which makes kids feel that there's something embarrassing about them," says Schwartz. "Do you call your elbow a pointy bit? No."

**Q. "While shopping with my 6-year-old, I picked up some tampons, and she wanted to know what they were for. I tried to give her a brief explanation of menstruation, but wasn't sure how much info she needed."**

-- Debbie Kaplan, 39, Foster City, CA

**A.** If your 6-year-old daughter wants to know what a tampon or maxi-pad is for, tell her ("This is for when I menstruate, once a month"), but your honesty doesn't have to extend to a possibly premature biology lesson. It can be upsetting for a child that young to hear about women bleeding from their vaginas. But if she expresses more curiosity about menstruation, says Schwartz, give her the simplest explanation you can ("It's a natural thing a woman's body does to help get ready to have a baby"). And dole out additional information only as she asks more questions -- and takes in the answers without looking disgusted or scared, or tuning out. "Remember, your daughter just needs a page from the book at a time -- not the whole book at one go," says Schwartz.

**Q. "My son Jack, 5, loves having his penis rinsed with the handheld shower in the bathtub. Obviously, it feels good. When he gets an erection, should I explain what's going on?"**

-- Sarah Smith\*, 40, Somers, NY

**A.** "Unless you're paying big water bills, a little extra penis rinsing is not a problem," says Schwartz. You should neither ignore nor try to stop it -- it does feel good, and good for your son for figuring that out. That said, use this as an opportunity to chat about public versus private: "Your penis is a private part, which is why we only touch it in private." And don't worry about explaining the mechanics of erections. If he asks why it gets hard or big, just say,

"Yep, that's how they work."

*\*Name has been changed.*

**Q. "My 7-year-old daughter walked in on her father and me having sex recently. Later she said, 'Are you and Dad going to get naked and wrestle again? It's so embarrassing.' I don't want her to find sex embarrassing. What should I have said?"**

**-- Jennifer Margulis, 38, Ashland, OR**

**A.** "A 7-year-old is going to find sex embarrassing no matter what," says Schwartz. At this age, children are both aware of and repelled by sexuality. The worst thing you can do is to feed the embarrassment by explaining what she saw. Instead, steer yourself back to her question: The best answer is "I was with your dad privately, and sometimes cuddling that way is what we do." It happens; kids sometimes walk in on sex. So don't amp up the anxiety by scolding her. "This situation is about drawing the distinction between privacy, which is a good thing, and secrecy, which isn't," says Chirban.


**Q. "Our 5-year-old asked us a bunch of questions about babies and where they come from. When our answers didn't satisfy her, she looked us in the eye and said, 'But how does the baby get inside?'"**

**-- Emily Furlani, 34, Brooklyn, NY**

**A.** How you answer this mother-of-all sex questions depends (natch) on how old your child is when she asks. And, says Chirban, "there are no hard-and-fast rules about the best time to begin a discussion about reproduction." That said, a girl this young may not be asking about reproduction, but rather making a very concrete observation: How does a whole big baby get inside a person? Just to dispel her confusion, it might be a good idea to clue her in to how babies, and all living things, start out very small. Try the classic how-a-seed-grows-into-a-plant story -- that may satisfy a precocious child's curiosity. But no matter what you say, don't be tempted to rely on easy evasions (ditch the stork, please). "Your child will remember your lie later on," says Schwartz. And while a lie may erode her trust in you, being honest with her will signal to your child that she can come to you with *any* question -- now and in the future.

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