

Talking about Relationships and Sexuality

Many parents are less than enthusiastic about talking with their sons and daughters about relationships and sexuality. Some have memories of uncomfortable discussions with their own parents while others do not feel competent to discuss anatomy and physiology with their children.

Parents of sons and daughters with intellectual disabilities have additional concerns. They may hold the belief that it is information their child will not understand, will never use or, worse yet, misuse. However, the truth is that youth with special health care needs are similar to all youth - they need meaningful relationships. For the most important part of the discussion of relationships and sexuality, parents are already the experts. They know the meaning of the information in the context of the family's belief system.

Relationship and sexuality education are dependent on understanding the developmental level of the child or youth and the sequence of normal sexual development and exploration at any given age.¹ Parents need to know what is normal and adapt their responses according to the developmental level of their child. In teaching a child about the reproductive aspects of sex, the use of simplified explanations, role-playing, special materials such as anatomically correct dolls or other modifications can help.

From a very young age children need to be taught that they have control over touch and a right to personal space. They must learn to say "no" to unwanted touch and know how to let others know if this occurs.

The following are some general hints and tips for facilitating conversations about relationships and sexuality for all youth, including those with chronic illness and/or disability:

- Encourage questions. Don't always wait until they ask!
- Take the opportunity to talk whenever a real life situation relates to relationships or sexuality. Use these 'teachable moments'.
- Don't go overboard with too much information. Be clear on what is being asked of you and answer according to your child's level of understanding.
- It is ok to say "I don't know"

¹<http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content-nw/full/pediatrics;124/3/992/T1> Table from: Clinical Report – The evaluation of sexual behaviors in children. Kellogg ND, The Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, American Academy of Pediatrics. 2009.