

# OPEN *and* HONEST

A parent's guide to talking with your child about sex and sexuality



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# About This Booklet

**This booklet will help you as a parent/guardian inform and support your child/tamariki to develop the attitudes, skills and behaviours s/he needs to become a healthy, happy and responsible sexual adult.**

This includes helping your child feel that sex and sexuality are a normal part of family life. Even though we are all sexual beings some of us may find it difficult to talk to our children and whanau about sex and sexuality.

This booklet will provide you with information and techniques to grab the moments that present every day to discuss sex, sexuality and relationships with your children.

## **Grab That Moment!**

*“Te manu e kai ana te miro, nona te ngahere; Te manu e kai i te matauranga nona te Ao.”*

The bird that partakes of the miro berry owns the forest; The bird that partakes of education, owns the world.

# Why Talk About Sexuality?

*“Ka kore ratou,  
kua kore he  
apopo.”*

Without them  
- there is no  
tomorrow.

**We are all sexual beings from birth to death, and sexuality is a natural part of us.**

Sexuality includes the biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of ourselves. It's about self-worth, relationships, feelings, communication, intimacy, sexual desire and expression, your attitude to your own body, being a sensual person, and ideas about how men and women should behave. Sex is about the act of having sex.

Teaching your child about sex is just a small part of sexuality education. What is most important is that you are able to help your child grow up to feel comfortable about his/her own body and sexuality.

**Parents and caregivers are the first and most important sexuality educators of their children.**

Sexuality education ought to be taught at home.

Children are naturally curious about their bodies and where they come from.

Some parents are afraid that talking about sex and sexuality will destroy their child's innocence, or that it may result in him/her becoming sexually active. When children express curiosity it does not mean they are interested in having sex.

Some parents feel anxious about providing too much information. Others are embarrassed about not knowing the answers to questions that are asked.

Children pick up messages about sex and sexuality from sources such as T.V, movies, music videos, internet, video games, friends and older siblings.

If they don't learn from you they will learn from somewhere else, and what they learn may not always be right.

**If you don't tell them someone else will!**

*“When my father had prostate cancer my son wanted to know where the prostate was and what it was for. I wasn't sure so we looked it up together.”* TERRY,

FATHER OF FIVE.

***“Kia kotahi te whanau - ka ora te tangata.”***

If the family is united - people prosper.

**Children and young people need the information, confidence and skills to manage the changes in their bodies and relationships and to handle pressures as they grow up.**

Research shows that parents talking with children can:

- Raise the age young people start sexual activity with others. Young people abstain from sex longer
- Reduce the likelihood of unplanned pregnancy
- Lower the likelihood of young people getting sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

Grab the moment to build the relationship and direct your child's learning.

**Give them the messages you want them to receive.**

# Where do I stand?

**Knowing, understanding and feeling comfortable about your own sexuality helps you to discuss sex and sexuality with your child. It will help you create a comfortable and open environment for discussion to take place.**

Parents/caregivers may find it difficult talking about sex and sexuality, particularly because we don't get much practice talking about it. But silence can send a message of discomfort.

How do you feel about sex and sexuality? Can you remember what it was like for you growing up? What did you want to know?

Our different backgrounds and experiences make us who we are and influence how we feel about sexuality and relationships.

Attitudes and values are first learned in the home. When parents talk openly and honestly about issues

***“It was only with hindsight that I realised how much impact my father’s dominant attitude towards my mother had on my behaviour with boyfriends I had. I let them walk all over me for ages.”***



such as virginity, teenage pregnancy, homosexuality, and abortion, and respect each other's viewpoints, they model good relationship skills. This helps children and young people to develop their own attitudes and values and encourages them to ask questions.

**Remember: values are taught, not caught.**

**You can:**

- Be honest
- Explain your values, and do what you say – set the example you want them to follow
- Encourage questions
- Present a variety of viewpoints
- State the facts. Tell the truth. Use the correct words.

While we probably hope that our children share our values they may instead take on the values of their friends or peers - we can't always control this.



# How do I start talking?

Children learn by observing their parents: how they relate to others, how they express feelings and how they respect other people's differences – including different values.

Your child is more likely to come to you for support around sexuality issues when they are a teenager if positive communication has been developed with them when they are young.

*"I sometimes catch myself yelling at my kids and then I think to myself I would never talk like this to a friend."*

GLENDIA, MOTHER OF FOUR.

*"I wanted to know what a man's penis looked like but my mum and dad never spoke about sexuality issues with me."*

MARIA, MOTHER OF FIVE

*"My heart sank when I found her blood- stained knickers hidden at the back of the drawer. Why didn't she tell me? I wished I had given her some pads for when the time came, or at least that I had been able to talk to her before it happened."*

SHELLY, TALKING ABOUT HER 9 YEAR OLD DAUGHTER.

## You can:

- Start talking when your child is young
- Use every day situations to start conversations
- Be open and honest - it builds trust
- Read stories and discuss them, including your values and beliefs
- Talk about sensitive issues when you are doing something else eg. doing dishes, washing the car
- Practice what you are going to say and the manner in which you would say it
- Check out what they already know
- Ask open ended questions (“What do you think / feel/ like/ know...”) rather than questions that get a “yes” or “no” response
- Help them find answers to their questions, if you don’t have the answers

***“I was doing the dishes with my seven year old grandson when he asked me what a boner was. I nearly dropped the plate. It flashed through my mind to tell him to wait until his mother came home, or not to be rude, or pretend that I didn’t hear him. I managed to say, “It’s when your penis gets hard”. “Oh,” he said and started chatting about something else. After that I felt I could handle anything”.***

JOANNA, WHO WAS CARING FOR HER GRANDSON.

- Talk to your friends. Get some books, pamphlets or search the web. You and your child can look at these together, or you look first – prepare yourself
- Try not to panic if you find your child exploring his/her body or a similar aged child's body. Acknowledge their curiosity, and suggest you learn more about bodies e.g. by getting a book together. (See page 10 Some important issues to address with your child.)

Be honest – it's ok if you get it wrong or feel embarrassed, these conversations may take a while to feel comfortable for you. The more you talk about it with your child the easier it will become.

See page 14 for suggestions on dealing with tricky questions.

***“I talk about the transsexual who was an MP, about girls having abortions without telling their mothers, about my brother having an affair – to show them I’m open to talking about these things with them.”***

# Some important issues to address with your child

## **PUBLIC/PRIVATE**

Discussions around public/private places and behaviours are really important to have with your children. It will help them to feel ok about their sexuality while learning there is a time and place to explore it.

Children naturally explore their bodies as they develop. Stating that it is ok, while defining where it is ok to do it, allows your child to feel positive about their sexuality. This helps save any possible embarrassment and avoids your child receiving negative messages in response to their exploration.

Defining the private places of your house allows you to direct private behaviours there – e.g. bathroom, toilet, bedroom. For example, if your child is touching their genitals in the lounge, you can explain they are a private part of the body, that it is fine to touch them if they want, but to do it in a private place in the house, not in the lounge which is a public place. This allows you to place some boundaries around your child's behaviour, while still allowing them to participate in the natural exploration of their body and feel ok about it.

In the future you only have to talk about whether they are in a public or private place, to reinforce what is appropriate. By simply putting the behaviour into a public/private category and asking for the correct behaviour for that place from your child, the focus of the discussion is not about whether that sexual behaviour is ok or not, but rather where it is ok to undertake it.

## **SAFETY**

Keeping your child safe from other people is an important part of parenting. However, we are often unsure how to do this and exactly who we are keeping them safe from.

It is important to teach your child that it is not ok for anyone else to touch the sexual – or private - parts of their body in a way that makes them feel not ok. Discussing bathing and who does this to help keep them clean and healthy is an important distinction to make. Talking about their body parts using the correct names, i.e. penis, vulva, vagina, bottom, will give your child the correct language to use if they needed to explain inappropriate touching to you. Using factual language also equips your child with a universal language in which to communicate.

Teaching them about 'ok' and 'not ok' touch and what this feels like helps children to tell the difference between touching that is ok, and not ok. Exploring with them how their body may physically react – butterflies in stomach, goose bumps, tightening of hands etc – in "not ok" situations, helps a child to recognise how their body may tell them when they need to get out of a situation.

Covering the **No, Go, Tell** rule gives your child an action plan of what to do in a “not ok” touch situation.

**No** – Saying no, very assertively, to the person that is touching them inappropriately

**Go** – getting away from the person, if possible and/or

**Tell** – Telling an adult, that you have identified together as a safe person.

Stranger danger is often the concept around “not ok” touch that most parents teach their children, and although this is a very important message it is only part of the story. Research shows that children are much more likely to be abused by people they know than by a stranger. It is important to talk to our children about this, but in a way that will not make them fearful of everyone around them.

Discuss that not only strangers can hurt us, that people we know can also do touching that is not ok. No matter who might try and touch them inappropriately, it is never ok and you will always believe what they say, no matter who they are talking about. You should not use any names or examples of uncle or aunty etc with this, just that any person that might do this to them is wrong.

Children naturally have a sense of “not ok” and it is important as parents that we let them develop these. By forcing our children to kiss or hug friends/family etc when they say that they don’t want to shows them that even if they are having a “not ok” feeling, (for whatever reason) adults can override this and make them do things around



touch that they don't want to do. Letting our children express their "not ok" feelings when they have them, and respecting that, shows them they have control over their own body. This helps them develop their confidence for the future. Mostly when a friend/family member wants a hug/kiss they will be fine about it, but they will know that it's their choice as well.

## **GENDER**

Female and male gender difference is a large part of our society and one that small children pick up on at a young age.

The first way they do this is through your role modelling as a parent. The tasks you undertake at home, the attitudes you have towards men and women, the comments - and the way you make them - about different people impact on your children.

Negative comments or attitudes towards certain people or behaviours negatively attributed to a certain gender, e.g. "He's a big sissy girl for crying" or "She's not very lady like for dressing like that," put our children into gender boxes, male/female, that might not fit who our children feel they are and therefore make them feel negative about themselves.

Allowing our children to develop attitudes, behaviours and personalities that move across the spectrum of what is acceptable for both males and females allows them to develop a rounded sense of themselves and feel confident and comfortable with who they are.

## TRICKY QUESTIONS

Parents can find it difficult to answer questions that their children impulsively come out with e.g. "Why has that lady got a fat tummy?" or "Is it wrong to be gay?"

**Tricky questions can be worked through by following the simple techniques below.**

- Acknowledge the question "That's a good question"
- Think to yourself why might they be asking this?
- Decide what message/information you want to give. What do they need for their age and stage of development?
- Check prior knowledge – "What do you think?"
- Keep it simple – state the facts
- If you don't know, say so – "I need to get back to you about that"
- Listen to the music - what is your tone of voice like?
- Check understanding – "Have I answered your question?"

## NOT A GOOD TIME?

Explain it is a valid question, but you'd like to discuss it at a more convenient time e.g. not in the middle of the supermarket.

# Talking with the Under Eights

**Children learn by stages, not ages. Children reach different stages at different times. Here are some suggestions for talking to children about sex and sexuality.**

## **UNDER FOUR**

Young children are naturally sensual beings. One of the main ways they learn is through touch and exploration.

If a parent/caregiver accepts exploration and understands this behaviour is natural, the child will learn that learning about their body through exploration and touch is ok. If a child is discouraged from touching their body s/he may start to feel that there is something wrong with it.

From birth, boys have erections and girls' vaginas lubricate. By age one most babies like to touch their genitals. It gives them nice sensations.

By two years most infants like pointing to parts of the body and saying their names aloud e.g. arms, legs etc. This is a good time to teach names for the

**Talking with  
the Under Eights**

***“Daddies make the babies up & put them in mummies’ tummies.”*** GIRL AGED 3

***“How did the worm get into your tummy?”***

SCARLETT – AGED 4

***“Dad’s sperm joined my egg and it grew into you.”***

sexual parts of the body, for example “penis” - “ure,” “vulva” - “teke,” “vagina” - “tara” and “bottom” - “kumu”/“nono”. Treating all parts of the body the same will normalize sexual parts of the body and reaffirms your child’s self discovery.

As they approach toddler-hood, children become aware and curious about gender differences. Some boys will know they have a penis and some girls will know they have a vulva and vagina. Curiosity about each others’ gender and genitals is generally the next step in their exploration. Undressing and looking at the bottoms of toys or the family pet is not unusual behaviour either.

They will repeat words, or common phrases used by those around them (including swear words) and have fun with toilet humour. Unlike adults, children are not embarrassed to use words like vulva or penis unless their parents are.

Children ask questions about where babies come from, and how they get into, and out of, women.

## You can:

- Teach them to use words for feelings such as happy, sad, angry, excited
- Give short, truthful answers to questions
- Become comfortable with and use the correct terms for body parts, as well as family names for them e.g. “Willy is also called penis.” This helps take away discomfort
- Talk about private and public parts of the body and public and private places. See page 10
- Talk about when touch is wrong and what to do if someone touches them in a way they don’t like. See pages 11 & 12.

## FIVE TO EIGHT YEARS

Children may continue with sexual-play and masturbation in public unless taught about public and private places. They may begin to have strong friendships with other children. This is a good time to begin talking with them about how friendships work, and how to be a good friend.

Also, children love to find out how things work and how they’re made. They are often curious about pregnancy and childbirth and how babies are made. Reinforce what may have been taught earlier about sex and reproduction and build on it. For example, include more detail about how babies are made and the stages of pregnancy.

If you haven't discussed sex and reproduction previously, this is a great time to look for the moment that will start you talking about it. Bear in mind, children at this age may be able to recite basic facts about reproduction but they still don't quite grasp the full story.

**You can:**

- Ask your child questions and find out how much they already know
- Build on their existing knowledge and make their understanding clearer. Repetition helps their learning
- Look for ways to praise your child
- Share your thoughts about love and relationships.

Children may change the subject if they are happy with the answer. You don't need to labour the point. Use their questions as a guide.

**Some girls will start having periods as young as eight years. Depending on your child's development and understanding, around eight years of age is a good time to start conversations with boys and girls about pubertal changes.**



# Talking about puberty

**What was puberty like for you?  
Did your family talk about sex? Was it embarrassing?  
Embarrassment, confusion, excitement, not knowing what to do or say – that's what it can be like for your child now.**

Discussing changes with your child before they happen helps them to cope positively and confidently with their physical and emotional changes.

Find out what they know already. Help them to understand that pubertal change is healthy and normal. Introduce all the issues that boys and girls their age are likely to experience: e.g. height and weight growth, body hair, growth in breasts (boys may experience a spurt in breasts too), menstruation, ejaculation (wet dreams), excessive sweating, acne, mood swings and intense emotions and the need for hygiene.

It is also a good time to talk about attractions and different types

**Talking about  
puberty**

***“Sometimes I watch TV with them and ask questions about the people in the story, about their relationships and what they’re up to. It’s a good way to get them talking.”*** BILL,

STEPFATHER OF TWO.

of relationships and the feelings associated with them.

As children grow older they will want to find out about sexual acts from as many sources as possible. Try opening up a conversation in a relaxed manner where you can be candid about sex while emphasising your values.

It is normal that children’s ideas about sex roles often become stereotyped. Conversations about puberty can also be the foundation for your child to learn more about managing their own developing sexuality e.g. assertiveness, attitudes, diversity, acceptance, meaningful relationships.

Under the current education curriculum the teaching of sexuality education is compulsory for state and integrated schools. Schools must consult with parents every two years about what will be taught. You can talk to your child’s teacher about what the school will cover and to help you to be consistent and reinforce their learning at home.

## What if your child doesn't ask questions?

### You can:

- Leave books or leaflets around the house
- Watch tv and dvds together and grab the moment – ask them “What do you think about that?,” check how they feel
- Discuss magazine and newspaper stories
- Talk about the pregnancy of friends or whanau
- Talk about their birth and development
- Talk about dealing with peer pressure
- Help them to understand that other families have different beliefs and values, and reinforce what is important to you and why
- Introduce differences - that people come in all shapes and sizes and personalities and that they are “normal.” Celebrate diversity and reinforce that we are all special and unique.

Talking about  
puberty

## Talking about puberty

Puberty may start as early as eight years and continue into the teenage years.

Changes at puberty include physical, emotional and social changes.

They may be energetic and purposeful one day and lie on the couch and be self conscious the next.

**They may have strong attractions for the same sex and opposite sex; these feelings are normal and may have no bearing on sexual orientation.**

- Body shape changes
- Increased size and colour change of the genitals
- Hair growth around the genitals, under the armpits and on the legs and arms
- An increase in sweating and oiliness of the skin
- Sudden mood swings and intense emotions – love, hate, joy, anger, sadness
- An increase in sexual feelings and fantasies
- Blushing at almost anything

**Behaviour and relationships may change:**

- They may think everyone is looking at them
- They may become argumentative
- They may feel bullet proof
- They may eat constantly

- They may masturbate or rub their genitals for pleasure
- They may have intense feelings for the same or opposite sex. This is normal
- They may feel pressure from their friends
- There is a strong desire to fit in
- Plans and minds may change constantly
- They may want more time to themselves and more privacy
- They may question family values and will be forming their own

#### **Young women:**

- Oestrogen and progesterone are produced by the ovaries causing changes
- Hips and waist change shape and enlarge
- Ovaries start to produce eggs
- Vulva, vagina, breasts and nipples get bigger
- Pubic hair appears, breasts develop – sometimes unevenly
- Periods/menstruation begins, usually between 9 -14 years
- Can have vaginal discharge
- Can orgasm when masturbating

### Young men:

- Testosterone is produced by the testicles causing changes
- Chest and muscles grow larger
- Penis, scrotum and testicles get bigger
- Have more erections
- Breasts may swell temporarily
- Hair starts to grow on face, chest, arm pits
- Voice gets deeper
- Sperm will start being produced in the testicles at the time pubic hair appears
- They can now ejaculate and/or orgasm. Some will have wet dreams.

**Listen to your child express how s/he is feeling. It can be a confusing time and they need all the support that you are able to give.**

If you find that the discussions are not working for you then call in reinforcements.

***“I knew that I could not be both mother and father to my boys. They got on well with their uncle so I asked him to have a man-to man talk with them. But I checked out where he was coming from first so that I knew we had the same ideas about how to treat women and that sort of thing.”***

LEILANI, SINGLE MOTHER OF THREE.



# Talking with teenagers

**Young people often learn by taking risks and experimenting. As adults we can over-react. Try to keep things in perspective. If your teenager makes mistakes remember that's a part of growing up and young people need to know you love them.**

Parents remain role models for their teens even though the peer group is increasingly important. The desire for social acceptance is important and can lead to increased risk taking.

They need to know that you are there for them in spite of the things they may do and say sometimes.

Communication will help maintain a good relationship.

## **You can:**

- Get the ball rolling and start the conversations
- Role model effective negotiation and decision making skills
- Demonstrate respect by listening to your teenager's opinions, beliefs and developing values. Expect the same respect from them. Ask them to listen to your views
- Give reasons why you value what you do but don't lecture

***“Even if you are angry with us still support us.”***

ANONYMOUS TEENAGER

***“If I get into an argument with my boy, I try to show him that I understand his point of view, even if I still don't agree with him.”*** DAVID,

SINGLE PARENT

- Love your teenager unconditionally. Let them know they are precious and unique
- Reinforce what they are doing well rather than focusing on any negatives
- Show confidence that your teenager can weigh up different points of view and make good decisions about their own health.

#### Talking with teenagers

***“It’s hard for us because it goes against the culture when the young ones want to know about their sexuality. It’s a big culture issue.”***

SAMOAN MOTHER.

***“When I was 14 or 15 my mum was listening to the radio and something came on about sex and condoms. She turned around to me and said, “If you’re having sex I hope you’re using condoms.” I was so embarrassed. This came from out of the blue. I wasn’t prepared. She put me on the spot.”***

ALEX.

## KEEPING OUR TEENAGERS SEXUALLY SAFE

Teenagers want to enjoy their relationships and sexual experiences and avoid heart break and harm.

Both young men and women highly value intimacy, and view having a partner will help them fit in and gain respect.

Not all teenage pregnancies are unplanned or unwanted, but for most young people and their parents pregnancy is a big fear.

You can emphasise protecting and enjoying themselves with out worry, rather than the risks of some behaviour.

**Communication is key.**

## **A few facts:**

- Condoms, used properly, provide protection against most sexually transmissible infections (STIs), including HIV. Using lubricant helps prevent them breaking.
- Condom packets have instructions on use. It's a good idea for guys to practice putting them on before they need to use them. Prescriptions for up to 144 condoms are \$5 from Family Planning.
- The legal age to consent to have sex is 16 years. Prosecution is unlikely if the partners under 16 are of similar age, and sex is consensual.
- There is no lower age limit for being able to get contraception.
- If a young man fathers a child he is legally responsible for the child until the child's 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. If he is under 18 the financial responsibility falls on his parents.
- The Emergency Contraceptive Pill (ECP – or “morning after pill”) prevents pregnancy. It can be used up to 72 hours after unprotected sex, or if a condom breaks. It is available on prescription, from Family Planning or GPs, Emergency Departments and can be purchased over the counter at pharmacies.
- Sexually transmissible infections are most common in the under 25 age group. Many STIs don't have symptoms but can cause short and long term damage if left untreated. Chlamydia is NZ's most common STI and can leave people infertile. Chlamydia is easily treated.
- Sexual health checks are free for under 22 year old NZ residents at Family Planning and free for all NZ residents at hospital run clinics.

***Research shows that when young people know their parents' dreams and expectations the young people are more likely to consider them when making decisions about their behaviour.***

### You can:

- Talk about how loving, respectful relationships can be very enjoyable and pleasurable
- Reinforce that it's never ok to pressure someone into any sexual behaviour, especially sex
- Discuss the influences of alcohol and drugs on decision making ability and sexual desire and performance
- Let them know it's ok to say no to anything that doesn't feel right, or anything they don't feel ready for
- Talk about ways they can deal with unwanted pressure for sex or drug use etc.
- Find out about contraceptive options – be prepared by developing your knowledge base
- Encourage your son/daughter to talk with a professional about contraception before they become sexually active e.g. make an appointment at a Family Planning centre
- Find out where they can go for support if they are confused about their sexual orientation
- Share the dreams you have for your children and ask about their dreams.

Embarrassed? That's normal. But remember how it was for you when you were their age. You have a right to keep your personal experiences personal and you don't need to have all the answers. Be prepared to find out together or on your own and ask for help if you need some support yourself.

## TEENAGERS GOING OUT

You can role model good negotiation skills. Agree to some conditions/rules e.g.

- Quantity of alcohol, if any, to be taken to parties
- Be in touch with other parents and in particular the host's parents – if appropriate
- Go over a few scenarios so that the teenager can have some options for situations they may find themselves in
- Discuss safety plans around the possibility of drink spiking, and rehydrating with non-alcoholic drinks

Talking with  
teenagers

***"I tell my kids to listen to their gut feelings. If they haven't got a choice or don't feel in control of the situation they need to change what they are doing and get out of there."***

CHRIS, FATHER  
OF TWO.

- Be a transport option, or ensure they have money for transport
- Remind your teen that alcohol can cloud judgement and decrease inhibitions
- Discuss your teen sticking with their mates, and not wandering off or accepting lifts from people they've just met
- Reinforce that no one ever owes anyone else sex, and sex with someone who doesn't consent is rape
- Remind them it's about safety not trust. Express your hopes that they'll have a good time and will keep safe
- Encourage a phone call home if they need help.



## **PARENTING A PARTY**


**If you and your teenager are planning a party consider:**

- How many and who are coming, will it be invitation only?
- What will supervision of the party look like?
- What sort of food will be provided?
- What behaviours will be acceptable, and what won't? e.g. is alcohol ok, and if so how much?
- Who will monitor behaviour, what is the contingency plan if some behaviours are of a concern?
- Discuss possible text messaging to uninvited guests – how will the possibility of gate crashers be managed?
- How will travel home be monitored?
- Will guests be staying over?
- What time will the party finish?

**You can:**

- Involve your teenager in the responsibilities of having a party
- Let the neighbours know of the proposed party

- Stay in and don't leave the party to boil over
- Drop in from time to time with snacks and filling food
- Liaise with your teenager and check he/she is happy with how the party is going, and that there aren't unwanted visitors
- Enjoy meeting and being near these teenagers
- Remember you are the adult and have the final say on all safety issues
- Regroup the next day and discuss what went well – compliment those things and discuss what you would want to be done differently if you decide to hold another party.



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