



Children, disability, and sexuality – these are three words that many parents have trouble thinking about. The thought of a child as a sexual being can be overwhelming, more so if the child has a disability. You may be thinking, “We have so many challenges already. Do we have to think about sexuality too?” Yes! But don’t worry – you can tackle this tough topic in steps.

Step 1: Role Modelling

The first step in teaching your child about sexuality begins with role modelling. Everything you say and do is a lesson for your child. If you want your child to understand privacy issues, it is up to you to role model good private behaviour for your child. This can even mean that a situation like changing a baby’s diaper can be a lesson in private and public behaviour. This will help your child avoid embarrassment and ridicule, by learning what is allowed in private and in public.

Step 2: Talking

Talking about sexuality begins with talking about public and private. What is a private body part, item and place? What is okay to talk about in public and private? Talk to your child about relationships and boundaries in very simple terms. Understanding the difference between public and private is the foundation for future discussion about sexuality.

Step 3: The Four C’s

When teaching your child, think of the 4 c’s:

Creativity – Even if your child learns best with one form of teaching, it can become boring. Try different ways of teaching, and always try to use humour. Everyone learns more readily if it is fun and enjoyable.

Constancy – Repeating lessons assists your child to remember them.

Consistency – Make sure that everyone who is working with your child is passing on the same information, has the same approach, but preferably using alternate techniques.

Compassion – You understand how difficult learning can be for your child, and can empathize with his or her struggles. A bit of compassion goes a long way.

Common Sexuality Issues:

How can I teach my child to pull up her pants before coming out of the school washroom?
Think about what your child does at home. If you have taught her, using role modelling, to close the bathroom door before pulling down her pants, and to pull up her pants before opening the door, your teaching may prevent her leaving the bathroom at school with her pants down.

If your child needs help with toileting, you can help her understand what to expect by talking to her while you help out, and telling her why you are doing it. Talk to your child about who is allowed to help with toileting, and why it is ok for that person to touch his or her private parts. Also, show your child the correct way to do it, so they know what to expect. A personal care attendant can assist with toileting if they have the child’s consent. Gloves should be worn by attendants when they are assisting and when touching private body parts.

My son masturbates when he is in class. We’ve tried everything but he won’t stop. What can I do?

First, make sure that you have ruled out that your son is not having a reaction to any medication or fabric, or something else that may be affecting his body. Once other factors are ruled out, you can then see if your child is having an impulse control problem.



Masturbation is natural and normal for boys and girls, but it is a private behaviour and should be done in a private place. You may need to talk with your child about what behaviour is okay in private and public. Sometimes, behaviours are a way of getting attention – even if it is negative attention – from parents, teachers or classmates. If a child feels left out and thinks that he is being ignored, public masturbation gets attention. As your child gets older, you should talk to him or her about the consequences of public sexual behaviours.

I am worried about my daughter reaching puberty. She already faces enough challenges with her disability – how will she understand getting her period?

With few exceptions, females start having their period, or menstruating, during puberty. It is best to talk to your daughter about what will happen to her body BEFORE she reaches puberty and the changes begin. There are many resources to help you talk with her – books, videos, games, life-size replicas of body parts, and anatomically correct dolls as young children, adolescents, and adults. If your daughter needs the help of a personal care attendant, be clear about why the attendant will need to touch her more frequently when she is menstruating, for health and hygiene reasons.

My child is overly friendly and trusting. What can I do to protect him?

This teaching begins with you role modelling safe behaviour and relationship boundaries. Your child will see how you greet different people, like strangers, friends, colleagues, family and neighbours. Talk to your child about interacting with different people. There are programs and resources available to help you, such as games, books, and flash cards. The CIRCLES video program can help you to teach about relationships and boundaries. It comes with ready-to-colour pictures, and addresses the amount of touch, talk and trust that is allowed within different circles of people. This program can also be used as the framework for all discussions and learning about sexuality.

My child feels left out and doesn't have many friends. How can I help her build confidence and self esteem?

All children want to feel like they fit in and are part of the group. Encourage your child to do as much as she is capable of doing in any activity, and praise actions and behaviours. Every child makes mistakes and has accidents when learning something new. Support your child to try again (and again), rather than doing it for her. Encourage your child to think about her talents and abilities. What does she appreciate in other children? Role-play with your child how she might approach someone that she wants to have as a friend.

How can I protect my child from being sexually abused?

You are already protecting your child if you are teaching about relationships, boundaries, body parts, public and private situations, and gender difference. This will prepare your child to protect him or herself, and prevent abuse. If they understand about different types of relationships, they will understand what is right and wrong in these relationships. When you build your child's self-esteem and encourage him or her to attempt things, you build the personal power needed to make good decisions when someone tries to take advantage of him or her. Children who are allowed to make choices have the opportunity to learn to say "no" and "I don't want to do that."

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*Promoting Better Health for Children with Disabilities
through Clinical Services, Education and Research*