

Let's talk – Tips for talking

Many caregivers grew up in homes where issues related to puberty and reproduction were rarely discussed, so we often don't have memories of how to deal with the topic. Sometimes we're so concerned with 'getting it right' that we avoid or miss the opportunities for conversation. Often, we wait for our children to ask a question — which some will do, but many others won't. Talking with your kids and letting them see you are open to their questions and concerns ensures they know they can come to you for advice and support.

When a child asks a question, it means they're ready to learn, but they're not necessarily ready to know everything about that topic. Listen carefully to their question. You can explore it together, or say to your child that you don't know the answer, but will get back to them when you have the information you need. Try not to use this as a tactic to avoid answering — always respond as best you can. It can be helpful to ask yourself the question, 'Do I want to give my child information about this, or would I rather they ask their friends or search the internet for it?' If you're the person giving your child this information, you then reduce their vulnerability to the influence of others (whether internet or peers).

- think about the 'question behind the question' — if you're not sure what they want to know, question them further and clarify what they are asking
- answer the question as honestly and simply as possible, and try to avoid 'over-answering'. It's normal if you're a little anxious to compensate by talking too much and giving too much information; just remember children will only process what they can understand at that time
- find 'teachable' moments, i.e. watching TV together, looking at advertisements, etc
- it's okay to feel uncomfortable
- if you don't know how to respond, it's okay to say so. You don't need to know all the answers
- some information is private and personal — you can set boundaries
- age-appropriate books are great
- facts are not enough: share feelings, values and beliefs
- if possible, try to talk about bodies and changes in a non-negative way. We want to reassure them that these things are normal
- remember that you're letting your child know that you care about their happiness and well-being
- keep your sense of humour