



Why I Talk to My Fourth-Grader About Sex

how can a 16-year-old girl have a baby?" This was the question my 9-year-old daughter tossed across the breakfast table one morning last summer as she sat before a half eaten bagel in her blue pajamas with the word PRINCESS scrawled neatly across the front. She'd been puzzled to see a teenage mother in a video the night before.

I knew it would come eventually, this opening salvo of sexual curiosity. I'd been anticipating it long enough, wondering how I could best introduce my little girl to the complexities of one of humanity's most basic functions. Now I took a deep breath and dove in: "After a girl starts her period, she might become pregnant if she has sex with a boy."

That was the starting point. From there I moved on, eventually covering a good bit of the how, what, when and why of sex—along with several of the why-nots. We talked not only about how a 16-year-old can have a baby, but also about what a mistake it can be at that age to engage in the kind of behavior that might lead to one.

My daughter asked a lot of questions: What's a period? A uterus? A sperm? I tried to answer this outpouring of natural curiosity as forthrightly and age appropriately as I could, tacking on a few questions of my own: What did she think about the things I was telling her? Did any of them confuse her? Bother her? Contradict what she'd heard from her friends? I hoped to have a conversation, not give a lecture.

Nine may seem like an early age for a child to be given straightforward information about sex—but is it really? Many of my daughter's friends are beginning to show signs of approaching puberty, and several of the girls in her fourth-grade class have crushes on boys—the same boys

that just last year they considered (in my daughter's words) "annoying dimwits." Their favorite movies and music routinely touch on the sexual electricity between young men and women.

A recent report on the sexual practices of children ages 12 to 15, issued by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, revealed that 20 percent of these young adolescents have sex by the time they're 15. The report also noted that those youngsters who become sexually active are more likely than their peers to indulge in other risky behaviors like drinking.

In an interview on National Public Radio, Sarah Brown, the director of the National Campaign, said that in her talks with teenagers she'd learned that most look to their parents as primary sources of sex information. When they don't get what they need from their parents, they turn to their friends and siblings for advice—often bad advice.

I'd like to make sure my daughter gets good information and good advice by seeing that both come from me. Sex crops up often in our conversations now. For instance, I knew it was time to tackle the subject of homosexuality when she came home from school with the following news: "You know Mr. _____, the history teacher? Well, he's a lesbian." And then there was the day she overheard someone

call her friend's younger brother "an accident." "How can a baby be an accident?" she asked, a question that led us straight into the big, wide world of contraception.

Whenever and however the subject of sex comes up, I talk to my daughter as honestly and unabashedly as I talk to her about anything else—about hygiene or homework or friends. Along with facts, I give her my opinions and beliefs, and tell her stories about my own relationships with boys, so she'll see that I once struggled with the same dilemmas she will face in the not too distant future.

I'd rather my daughter not experience sex until well after she experiences calculus, but I doubt that the way to reach that goal is to keep her ignorant of its physical, moral and emotional intricacies. I could try to watch her every move, of course, and monitor her every social interaction. But I'm pretty certain that micro-managing her life wouldn't be any more effective than keeping her in the dark.

A better way to ensure that she makes the right choices, I'm convinced, lies in imparting to her my knowledge and—even more important—my values. So I tell her the expectations her father and I have for her future behavior, and explain to her why I believe that where there is no love or mature commitment, passion can leave you sorrowful and cynical, while with these things, it can sweeten your life.

Ultimately, I want to instill in my child the faith that she can always come to me, unembarrassed, with her most intimate feelings and concerns. That way, as the dangerous years go by, maybe I can help her to keep both her self-respect and her cool, as well as her hopeful heart. **FC**

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