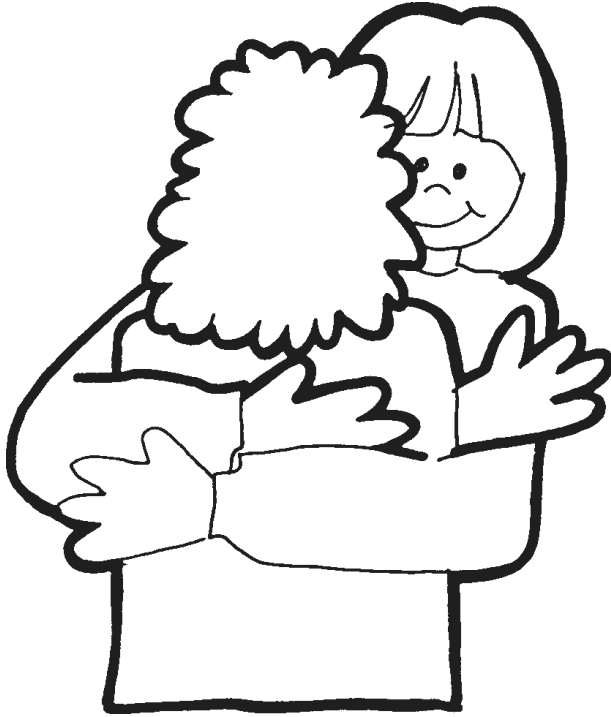
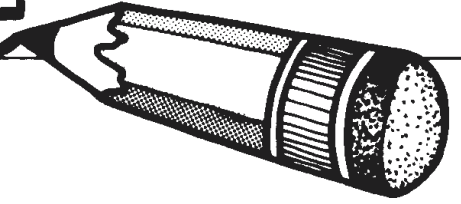


Parenting Pipeline

*A newsletter for parents of fourth-grade children
from Iowa State University Extension*



Starting Early: Sexuality Education for Preteens

During the preteen years, children define and refine their values, beliefs and knowledge about sexuality. Your factual information and open discussion will help your child develop healthy and responsible sexual attitudes. This involves more than just one talk. It's an ongoing process of sharing information.

Preteens often confront life with a newspaper approach. They want to know about everything — who, what, when, where, why and how. These questions are opportunities for you to pass your values and beliefs as well as accurate information to your child. If you don't talk to him, your child will continue to seek information from any source available. The information in magazines, movies, music and the Internet; in jokes or on bathroom walls; and from friends is rarely the picture parents want their children to have.

Research indicates that parents are still more influential in conveying values and beliefs than media and peers if parents are indeed doing the job. Purchasing or checking out from the library a few good resources and attending a class on becoming a woman or man are great places to begin.

Understanding Your Preadolescent's Concerns

Eight- to 12-year-olds are:

- Concerned about their bodies — how they work and how they compare with their friends' bodies.
- Busy with social development. This is a time of becoming increasingly independent from parents and more sensitive to peers. Children are concerned with how they fit in with their friends and what their peers think of them.
- Becoming aware of and interested in the opposite sex.
- Concerned with, "Am I normal?" The wide range of physical development among peers accelerates this concern.
- Developing interest in the importance of physical appearance and personal grooming.
- Interested in sexual anatomy, sexual vocabulary and sexual behavior.

How Can Parents Help?

Parents may find that talking with preteens about sexuality is embarrassing or uncomfortable. Sexuality can be a difficult topic for many parents, but most parents want to communicate about sexuality. Here are some suggestions to help you talk with your child.

- It's OK to be uncomfortable. You can reduce this by practicing. Discuss sexuality with your partner or friends.
- Being knowledgeable reduces discomfort. Read a reliable book about reproduction. If your child asks a question you don't know, look it up together.
- Use television as a springboard for discussions with your child. It may be easier for both of you to discuss issues involving television characters.
- Listen to your child's question. Then respond, "I'm glad you asked. What do you think?" This opens the door for discussion. You will discover what your child already knows, and you can correct any inaccurate information.
- Don't always wait for your child to ask. Look for ways to initiate a discussion or invite a question.
- Be prepared to discuss a topic more than once. As your child develops, he will want to check out information with you.
- Encourage your child to come to you for information. Encourage her verbally and with the body language you use when listening to her.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I'm just learning to be comfortable talking about this. My parents never talked to me about these important subjects."
- Read an age-appropriate book with your child that introduces the topic of sexuality. Take time to discuss questions or share conversation.
- Clearly communicate your parental values and expectations regarding sexuality to your child. Help her to understand how to apply these values.
- Teach your child limits regarding sexuality, especially concerning behavior that may be inappropriate to abusive.
- Assist your child to develop a healthy body image and personal esteem.

What Does Your Preadolescent Need to Know?

- Preteens need knowledge of what to expect during puberty. Both boys and girls need information about how boys' and girls' bodies develop and the timing of these changes.
- They need reassurance that they are normal — that young people develop at different times and rates.
- Young adolescents need to know about reproduction. They are intensely interested in how pregnancy occurs, in the birth process, in twins and in many other topics.
- Both girls and boys need to know about major changes they will experience: menstruation and nocturnal emissions (wet dreams). Girls need positive, detailed explanations of what to expect during menstruation and how menstruation relates to pregnancy. Boys need reassurance that wet dreams are normal.

Your child needs to know that he is valued and can come to you for information and to talk about concerns and feelings.

When you communicate about sexuality with your child, you are teaching her that:

- information is valued
- each person is important
- sexual behavior entails responsibility, consideration and decision making
- communication is important.

Adapted for use in Iowa from Parenting Pipeline, North Dakota State University Extension Service, by Donna K. Donald, family life field specialist, Iowa State University Extension.

This newsletter is published for families with fourth-grade children by Iowa State University Extension. For more information about parenting education, contact your local county extension office or access the Iowa State University Extension to Families website, www.extension.iastate.edu/families.

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