



# ANDORRA PEDIATRICS

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## Having the Sex Talk With Your Kids

*by Christina Wood  
Family PC - May, 2000*

### **The Web can help parents jump-start the difficult discussion about the birds and the bees.**

When I was 10, my brother told me all about sex. At 12, he had no personal experience, but he'd figured it out, he said, by reading a book about whales. I was skeptical. "It makes logical sense," he said, defending his thesis. "Whales are mammals. People are mammals. It's how babies are made."

I humored him but I did not fully believe him until-years later-my mother confirmed it by nervously sitting me down to explain how babies are made. To her relief (though she was furious with my brother), I did not let her get far before I admitted I knew all about it.

Sex is not a topic parents look forward to discussing with their kids, but-like sex itself-there is no avoiding it. If your child does not get this deductive reasoning skills-but more likely from magazines, TV shows, movies, or other (probably misinformed) kids. Experts say parents are not protecting their kids by keeping sex, pregnancy, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) a secret. "Kids are already thinking about sex," explains Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. "And all the research shows that when parents and teachers talk to them about the options from abstinence to contraception-as well as relationships, risky behavior declines. Informed kids are less likely to have sex impulsively" she offers.

My mother came at me armed only with a pamphlet from the Tampax box. My brother had less to go on. Today, you and your teen can turn to the Internet for facts, personal advice, resources, support, and guidelines for handling this dicey discussion. Before you log onto the Web however, remember that providing your teen with a comfortable, anonymous environment where he can get all the facts is a start, but it's not a substitute for you. "Most of what kids need to know from their parents has to do with values and relationships," explains Brown.

### **Get 'em Young**

Don't wait until your kids are old enough to have sex to bring up the subject. "If you have a child older than 5 or 6 and you have not incorporated any information about sexuality into your conversations, you are falling behind," offers Susan Burner Bankowski, associate director of the Campaign for our Children, a Maryland-headquartered national program designed to prevent unintended adolescent pregnancies. "Even as young as 3," she suggests, "parents should name all the body parts-by their correct name-so kids do not think some parts are yucky or bad, and so they have the vocabulary to tell you if someone abuses them."

That does not mean that you tell a 5-year-old, or even a 10-year-old, about abortions and STDs. All your discussions should be age-appropriate. Start with talking about body parts and continue an open dialogue throughout their life. Make it clear you will answer any question they have without assuming they are misbehaving. "Just because they ask you about sex, does not mean they are doing it," says Bankowski. And even as your darling child becomes a sullen teen who rolls her eyes at everything you say, soldier forward and bring the topic up whenever you see an opportunity. Events in the news and on TV sitcoms can be excellent springboards.

"All the research shows that teenagers care an enormous amount about what their parents think," offers Brown. "They look to their parents as their first and best sex educators. Parents think that kids 13 and up do not want to hear what they have to say. They do-even though many kids do not act like it."

## Surfing Without Getting Dirty

The Internet can be a great starting-off point to get the sex-education conversation going. If you have already attempted to research sex education on the Internet, you have probably stepped right into a disgusting pile of pornography, politics, and dogma. To save you from repeating that unpleasant experience, we have assembled a handful of the best sex-education sites that you and your teen can surf together. Only you can determine, though, based on the age of your child, what topics he is ready for, and what you are comfortable perusing together.

It is best to check out these sites alone before you sit down together. Trust me, the minute you see the statistics on teen pregnancy and STDs and read the stories of teens that have made mistakes, you will be over your reluctance to have this conversation.

If your kids are 9 to 14, start with Campaign for Our Children ([www.cfoc.org](http://www.cfoc.org)) . At press time, the group was revamping its site to be more inviting for teens, but clearly the message here is abstinence. Because the site targets tweens and young teenagers, you will not find a lot of graphic talk about how to have sex or get an abortion. You will find some invaluable guidance on how and when to talk to your kids about sex. I recommend visiting this site even if your kids are only toddlers. There is a handy worksheet (Talking Points for Parents and Kids) that you and your teen can use to guide your talks. Still having a hard time getting started? Check out the teen pregnancy clock.

If your teen rolls her (or his) eyes and implies you are nagging when you bring up sex and pregnancy, sit her right down at the computer and show her the Teen Voices section of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy ([www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org)) . Have some hankies handy as you let the heart-rending stories of teen mothers and fathers do the nagging for you. The site is also a great place to visit while your kids are very young, because it provides sound advice on how to keep the dialogue open before they become teens. You can also arm yourself with tips, facts, resources, and statistics that could be very useful during your discussions.

Your teen can get the straight skinny about sex from other teens at Sex, Etc ([www.sxetc.com](http://www.sxetc.com)) . This site-by and for teens-is supported by the Network for Family Life Education at Rutgers University. But be aware that this site is targeted at older teens and has some very frank talk about sex. All those questions kids have but are probably too embarrassed to ask are answered here in casual, frank language by their peers. Teens can also e-mail questions to experts.

For candid talk about health concerns, ages 13 and up should go see Violet. Violet is an animated character that fields questions and offers advice at the Teen Center at the Vagisil Women's Health Center ([www.vagisil.com](http://www.vagisil.com)) site. When Violet gets a medical question, she forwards it to a medical professional. Dr. Adelaide Nardone, M.D., and Fellow with the American College of Gynecology, is the

medical advisor for the site. "You wouldn't believe the questions I get," she says. "Teens want to know everything." Nardone suggests that one solution for parents who are having trouble establishing a rapport with their teen, is to take her to a gynecologist so she can put forth her questions to an informed adult.

Kids-and parents-with questions about sexual orientation can visit the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)) . Even kids who have no doubts about their own orientation could benefit from learning a little about the impact of hostile epithets on kids of other persuasions.

If you've got an older teen and you want her to have access to information about how to use and get contraception, be sure she knows about Teenwire (<http://www.teenwire.com>) . The Planned Parenthood Federation of America hosts this site for older teens, and the conversation is frank, graphic, and unbiased. Teens will find answers to every question they may have about subjects ranging from getting their period to treating a sexually transmitted disease or unwanted pregnancy.

After you look at these sites you might feel you can't bring anything more to the discussion. Not so. Even kids mature enough to find information on their own still need your guidance. Susan Burner Bankowski has seen frightening evidence of this. "We get very serious questions," she says. "Kids are asking us intervention questions like, 'I'm pregnant. What do I do?' Why aren't they asking a real person who can help immediately? Parents need to be available to these kids."

### **Most of what kids need to know from their parents has to do with values and relationships.**

This information should not be used as substitute for the medical care and advice of your child's physician. Health related topics found on the Andorra Pediatrics web site should not be used for diagnosing purposes or be substituted for medical advice. As with any new or ongoing treatment, always consult your professional healthcare provider before making any changes in treatment or beginning any new treatment. If you have any questions or concerns, please call our office.