

Speakeasy: talking with your children about growing up

With foreword by Dr Miriam Stoppard

"Dad,
why have you
got hairs on
your chest?"

"What's happening
to my
voice?"

"How did I get out of
your tummy?"

"Mum,
I think I might be
pregnant"

"When will my
periods
start?"



talking sense about sex

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Introduction

The aim of this book is to help you – parents, grandparents, step parents, foster carers, carers – talk with your child about sex and relationships and growing up. This book has been written for adults so we're not suggesting you give it to your child to read. Instead we hope you will read the book on your own, and for the times when you want to look at information with your child, we've included details of useful websites and resources you can look at together. If your child is old enough you might want to suggest they look at these resources on their own.

The idea for this book came from **fpa**'s work with parents and carers on our Speakeasy courses, which have been running in UK communities since 1995. Speakeasy courses involve group work sessions that help parents and carers build the knowledge, confidence and skills they need to talk with their children about sex and relationships – a subject that children need to know about, but parents and carers often find difficult to discuss.

Parents and carers who have completed the Speakeasy course say they feel more confident in:

- their own knowledge of growing up, sex and relationships
- talking with their children about sex and relationships
- identifying situations in every day life when they can bring up the topic of sex and relationships
- answering their children's questions confidently and without embarrassment.

As one parent/carer put it, "The course gave me the confidence to be able to speak with my daughter about periods, pregnancy etc. I don't think I would have been able to do that six months ago, and it's given me the confidence for the future when my children are older."

You can find more information about Speakeasy at the end of this book.

But this book isn't just for parents and carers who have done a Speakeasy course. This book is for **every** parent and carer who wants to be able to talk openly and honestly with their child, and to help them make informed, safe choices when it comes to sex and relationships.

Why talk to your children about sex and relationships and growing up?

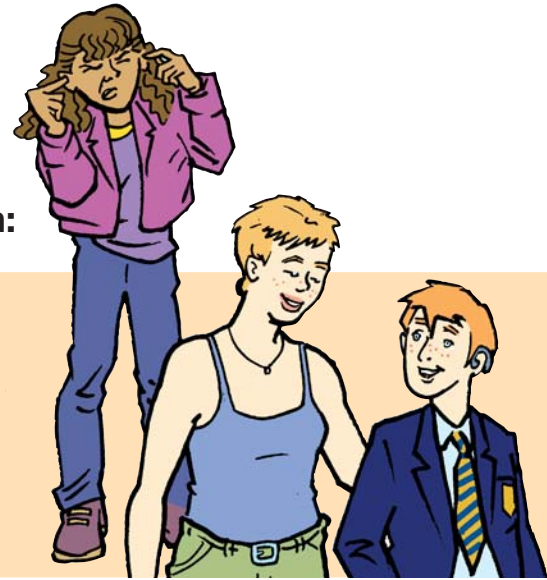
What this chapter covers

- How sex and relationships education can benefit children.
- Giving your child age-appropriate information.
- Helping to build your child's self-esteem and confidence.
- Helping young people take control of their sexual health.

There are good reasons to talk with your child about sex and relationships, and it doesn't have to be as hard as you think.

Good sex and relationships education can:

- raise the age young people first try out sexual activity¹
- make young people aware of how to avoid unwanted pregnancy and abortion
- make young people aware of how to avoid sexually transmitted infections.



It can also help young people:

- with their emotional development
- explore their own beliefs about sex and where these fit in with their own cultural and religious beliefs
- stay safe

1 Swan C et al, *Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood: a Review of Reviews, Evidence Briefing* (Health Development Agency, 2003) and Kirby D, *Emerging Answers 2007: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases* (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2007).

What this chapter covers

- The physical changes that happen to boys and girls during puberty.
- Emotional changes.
- Keeping healthy.

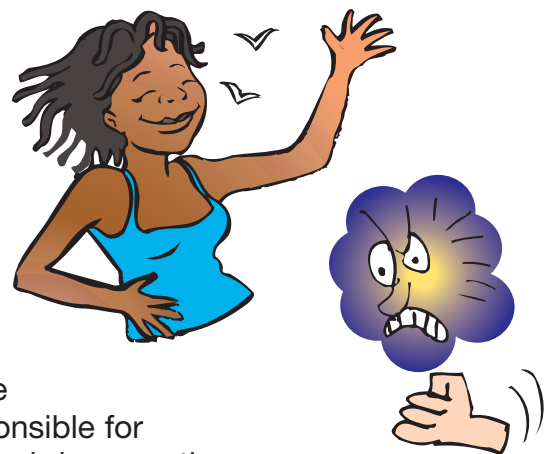
How you feel

Seeing your child growing up can trigger a range of emotions. You might feel proud, or sad, or worried, or a mixture of all these emotions, and more – and this is natural. Try to remember that you can help your son or daughter through puberty by making sure they know what to expect. There are a number of books and organisations that can provide help and support, including **fpa** and Parentline Plus (see Chapters 13 and 14).

How your child feels

Puberty affects young people emotionally as well as physically. Hormonal changes can lead to mood swings, including irritability, tearfulness, and confusion. They may become argumentative or bad tempered, and may challenge authority; they may feel intense emotions of love, happiness, low self-esteem, frustration and apathy.

Extreme feelings of creativity, love, rage and despair are typical of the teenage years because the body is producing high levels of the hormones responsible for these feelings. Some people barely notice the ups and downs; others may swing between exhilaration and despair.



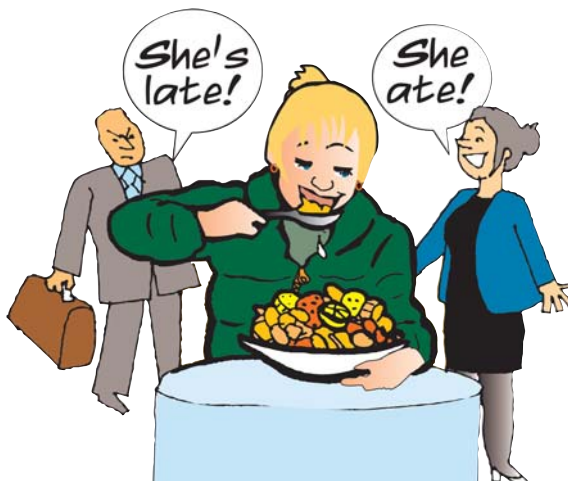
Helping your child build self-esteem

Self-esteem is an important factor in how we live our lives; it can inform the decisions we make and the way we treat ourselves and other people. Helping to build your child's self-esteem can feel like a difficult thing to do, but it doesn't have to be. Self-esteem is all about realising your own unique place in the world, and that the things you think and do have value.

But where do you start? Here are a few suggestions.

Looks

You can help your child understand that everyone is different, and that people's bodies develop in their own unique way. One way is not better than another. You can also teach your child that the idealised way that men and women look on television and in magazines is not realistic. Young men and women can worry about their weight, and can feel negative about themselves. Let them know that how they feel about themselves is more important than how much they weigh or what they look like.



If only ...

Sometimes it is easy for teenagers (and adults!) to fall into the trap of thinking 'if only...'. For example, 'my life would be perfect if only I were taller/thinner/had muscles/had perfect skin'.

If your child says something like this, talk with them about it. Ask them gently how they think it would make their life better if they were taller/thinner. Reassure them that what they look like is not the most important thing. What is important is what they are like as a person – the things they think and do and say, and how they treat people. These are why people become friends with them, not for their looks.



Some simple exercises

You can help your child think about their own achievements and good qualities by carrying out the following simple exercises together. **fpa** has used these exercises with groups of 9–13-year-old children, but you can use them with older or younger children, keeping the discussion appropriate to your child's age.

There are no right or wrong answers in these exercises; they are simply a useful tool for opening up discussion about values and the things people do.

“This book will give any parent trying to answer the toughest of questions all the help they need.”

Jo Brand, *comedian and broadcaster*

“fpa produces amazing literature for children and young people. I really liked the honest and down-to-earth approach of this book and would recommend it to any parent.”

Beverley Turner, *writer and presenter*

Speakeasy: talking with your children about growing up

Talking with your child about growing up, sex and relationships may feel like a daunting prospect, but there are ways to help make it easier.

You probably already have most of the skills you need to talk with your child about sex and relationships – you chat with your child, laugh together, answer their questions, help them learn about the world. All these skills play an important part in talking with your child about sex and relationships as a normal part of life.

This book aims to help you develop these skills and build up your knowledge and confidence so that you can dissolve the mystery and (most of!) the embarrassment around sex and relationships. Throughout the chapters, there is clear information about growing up, sexuality, puberty and sex, pregnancy and pregnancy choices, as well as contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and how your child can keep safe.

The book includes stories from other parents, typical questions your child may ask on a range of topics and suggestions of how you can answer appropriately for their age.



fpa

50 Featherstone Street
London EC1Y 8QU
Tel: 020 7608 5240
Fax: 0845 123 2349
www.fpa.org.uk

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