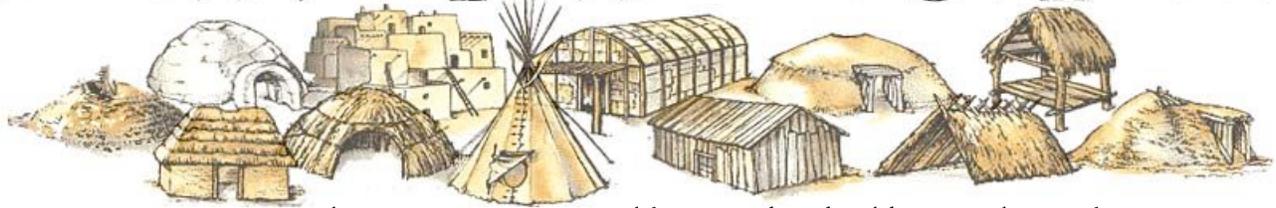


There's No Place Like Home ... for Sex Education



Age 3

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Growing up with healthy attitudes

By age three, your child has already received a wealth of messages about sexuality... 3 years worth! **Remember, sexuality is a broad topic... and not just about sex.** Just think about it:

- When infants are touched and cuddled, they learn that they are loved and lovable.
- Choices of clothing, toys (dolls vs. trucks), playtime activities all present messages about male/female roles and expectations.
- Seeing a brother, sister, or parent in the shower teaches about physical differences between males and females.
- A parent's willingness or reluctance to respond openly and honestly to the question, "How does the baby come out?" conveys a particular attitude about the subject of sex.

Children begin forming attitudes and learning values about sex from the day they are born. Even very young children deserve thoughtful, purposeful sexuality education. As a parent or caregiver, you are your child's most important sex educator. Your child has learned your values and attitudes toward sexuality all along by hearing your responses and watching your reactions. You have been educating your child about sex through your words, actions and even through your silence. The family experiences you shape for your child will determine to what extent s/he develops positive, healthy feelings and attitudes about sexuality.

Too much too soon?

You needn't worry about telling your child too much too soon. (Be more concerned about your child learning too little, too late.) Children simply absorb what they can and quickly grow bored with the rest (you know the signs: glazed eyes, yawning, leaving the room...).

Nevertheless, your comments are not wasted. Your child may not understand all the detail, but your willingness to talk about these issues conveys the message that mom and dad are "askable". When parents are approachable and respond openly and lovingly, they set the stage for healthy family sex education.

Teachable Moments

Q: Shouldn't I just wait until my child asks?

A: Children are interested in sexuality long before they can verbalize the questions. For example, a preschooler may want to watch daddy in the shower or touch mommy's pregnant belly. These times present ideal "teachable moments" to pass along lessons on anatomy, reproduction and birth. These opportunities also affirm your willingness to discuss sexual issues with your children. This helps establish an atmosphere of comfort and trust which encourages children to seek additional sexual information from parents in the future.

Is your sexism showing?

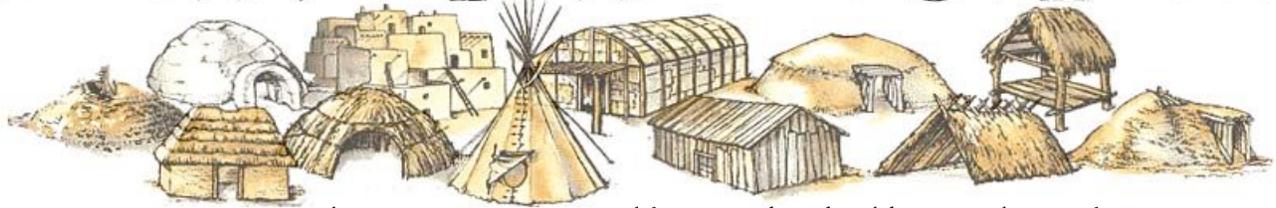
During the pre-school years, parents have some of the greatest opportunities to influence their children's sexual attitudes - including ones about gender expectations. It's a wonderful time to plant the seed that both boys and girls are capable of just about anything they wish. When parents are careful to avoid stereotyping male/female roles, children learn that life options need not be limited by their gender. This awareness does wonders for their self-esteem.

Take advantage of the many simple opportunities to broaden your child's perspective with regard to sex role expectations:

- **Share** household chores.
- **Allow and encourage** children to play with toys and take part in games that cross traditional lines. It's fine for boys to play with dolls and for girls to play football.
- **Read and tell** stories to your child - ones in which males and females are portrayed in a variety of roles.
- **Pay attention to language** that implies gender role limitations (i.e. "fireman" vs. "firefighter"). Use "he or she" in reference to doctors, nurses, etc. It's awkward, but makes an important point.

Simplistic? Pointless? Don't let the subtlety fool you. When parents refuse to pigeonhole male/female expectations, they allow their child's "self" to blossom.

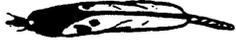
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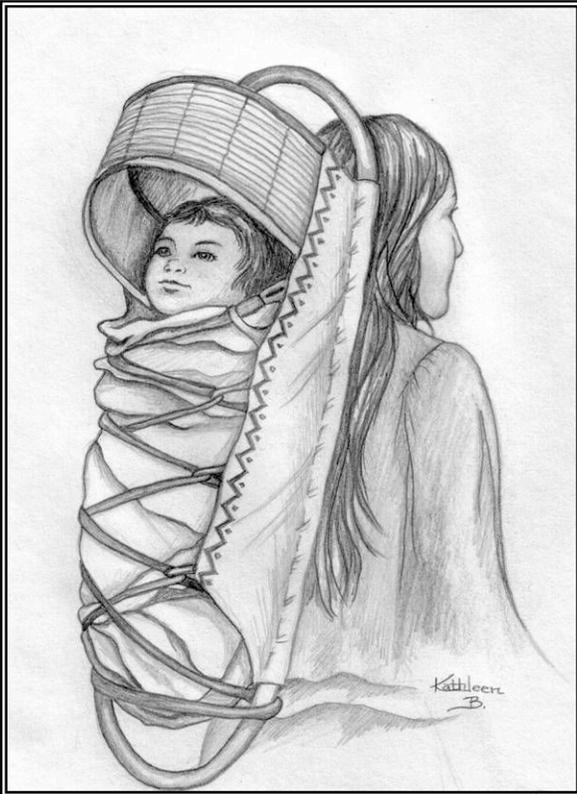
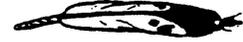
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Honesty is the Best Policy



As Native people, we pass on our heritage to our children through stories and song. Smiling Wind may have prayed to her ancestors for a child and awoke on a spring morning to find a baby wrapped in white elk skin at her side. It is important as we tell these stories that we also express to our children that the baby grew inside its mother, Smiling Wind, for nine months. It is important to balance the stories of our tribal past with our modern knowledge of health and reproduction. If your only response to your child's question about where babies come from is the story of Smiling Wind, s/he might believe s/he just appeared in bed with you one day.

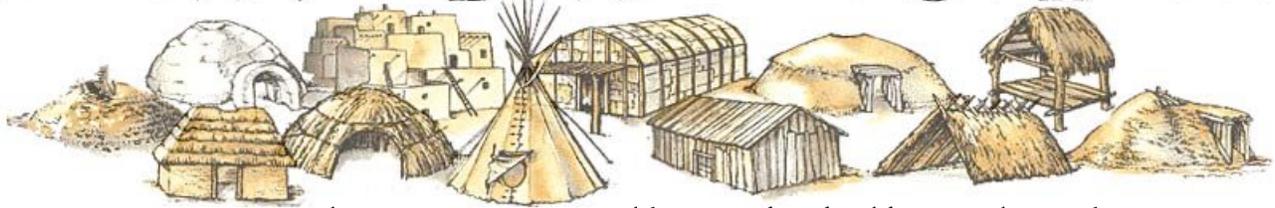
When your child asks you a serious question about where s/he came from, or any other sexual question, share your culture, tell your traditional stories, and supplement with accurate information. Children's questions deserve truthful answers - scaled to their level of understanding, of course. For example, when told that a baby is growing in mommy's tummy, a 3-year-old, whose view of the world is quite literal, may wonder, "Why would mommy eat the baby?" The image becomes one of baby and food together inside mommy's stomach (tummy). A more helpful answer would be, "A baby grows

inside a special place in the mommy's body. It's called the uterus." Simple, truthful answers prevent confusion. Beyond confusion, honesty can prevent a sense of mistrust that might develop if a child is only told by her parents that an eagle brought her, and later she discovers the truth. Care must be taken. When parents share factual explanations, the message implied is that sex is a subject to talk about openly and honestly.

When a young child asks, "Where did I come from?" a parent may at first say, "What a fine question! Do you have any ideas about that?" This accomplishes four things. It: affirms the question; clarifies what the child is really asking (S/he may simply mean "what city," in which case you're off the hook); buys the parent some time to collect his/her thoughts; and provides a sense of how much the child may already know.

The next response can be something simple and honest: "You started as a tiny cell inside mommy's body." This alone may well satisfy the child (although probably not), yet it leaves the door open for further discussion. The point is, honesty really is the best policy. There's certainly no need at this stage to deliver a lengthy description of intercourse, conception and birth. That's not what your 3-year-old is interested in now. S/he just wants some basic information. So relax. For the young child, sex doesn't have the same emotional significance as it does for an adult. Keeping this in mind can be a great help to parents as they encounter their children's normal sexual curiosities.

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There's a Time and Place ... Or Is There?

Pre-school children fondle their genitals for many reasons. They may be sleepy or bored, nervous or upset... and it's comforting; they may be in circle time listening to a story, or engrossed in a TV show. Pre-school children also fondle their genitals because it feels good. If parents find this hard to acknowledge, perhaps it's in the challenge of accepting that children are sexual beings.

Masturbation is a normal part of development. Most experts agree that this can be a healthy expression of sexuality, regardless of age. However, some people disapprove of masturbation for religious or other reasons.

The way in which parents react to their child's genital play is important. Punishing, scolding, or pulling the child's hand away sends a message that the genitals are bad or dirty. It can foster guilt, shame and embarrassment.

Parents who disapprove of masturbation could explain to their child - calmly and lovingly - that they believe this behavior isn't acceptable. Simply telling the

child, "STOP THAT!" is rarely effective ... as is trying to distract them with another activity.

Many parents do not object to their child's genital play, yet feel compelled (and rightfully so) to discourage its occurrence say, in the middle of the grocery store.

It's perfectly fine to respond with something like: "Sara, I know it feels good when you touch your genitals. And it's something you do in private - not where other people can see you." This sends a message about appropriate behavior and respect for others. At the same time, sexuality is kept in a positive light.

Parents who accept masturbation may worry that their child is "doing it too much." Children will stop when they are satisfied, or if they become physically uncomfortable. Compulsive masturbation - compulsive *anything* - may indicate a problem. If a parent notices his child is masturbating to the point where it interferes with other normal activities, it is time to consult a physician or other professional.

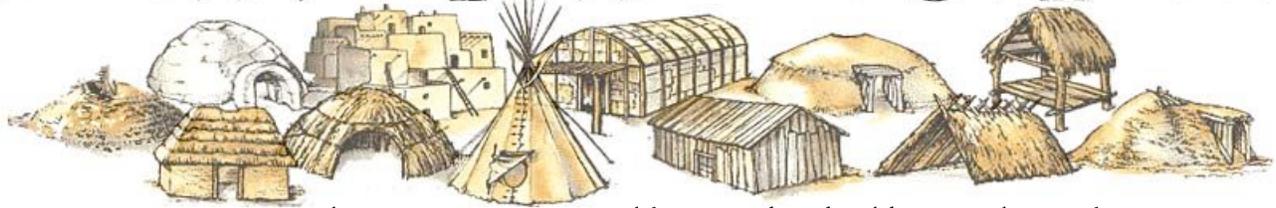
The "Askable" Parent

Attending to your child's sex education may be an awesome task. The reality is you are the ideal person for the job. After all, you can best convey the family values and beliefs surrounding this issue. Keep in mind a few tips to smooth the journey:

- ✓ **Parents: talk with one another** about the messages you want to give to your child about sex.
- ✓ **Anticipate** sexual questions and behaviors. Plan and practice your responses.
- ✓ **Answer questions as they arise.** Replies such as, "Not now" and "You don't need to know that," teach children it's not ok to ask. You can delay a discussion with "This isn't a good time now. Let's talk after dinner." Then follow through!
- ✓ **Tell your child** if you're uncomfortable. A comment like, "This is hard for me to talk about, but I'm willing to try" is wonderful! S/he will appreciate your honesty.
- ✓ **Answer simply and honestly**, leaving the door open for further discussion.
- ✓ **Initiate discussion** about sex. Ask, "Have you ever wondered about how you were born?" Use picture books; visit a pregnant friend.
- ✓ **Use everyday events** as "teachable moments" for passing along family and tribal messages about sexuality.

Your child's initiation into the lifetime process of sexual learning can be wonderful or difficult. You can choose.

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Names for Body Parts

An ear is an ear and a penis is a penis, not a “wee-wee;” a vagina is a vagina, not a “down there.” When parents avoid using correct names for sexual body parts, the message is that these parts are somehow different or that there is something wrong or unmentionable about them. This can result in children learning to be embarrassed or ashamed of their genitals.

Studies have shown the value of teaching children the proper names for sexual body parts. Aside from promoting a positive sexual attitude, accurate terms are empowering. For example, **if a child is trying to describe an injury or inappropriate sexual touch, s/he needs to be equipped with language more precise than “down there.”**

Frequently a child may refer to sexual body parts using terms s/he's heard from friends. It's perfectly fine to say something like, “Some people call it a “wee wee,” but that's just a made-up word. The real name is “penis” and that's the word we like you to use.” Such a simple, matter of fact response may seem somewhat trivial to us. To a child however, it's an important lesson - one which encourages respect and a healthy attitude toward his body and sexuality in general. This is a good time to share names for body parts in your Native language. Your tribal resource center is an excellent place to start looking for this information if you don't know it.

About this time, a girl begins to wonder what happened to *her* penis, and a boy wants to know “what those are” (pointing to mommy's breasts). Opportunities abound for sharing information on sexuality, growth and development. You will have to decide how you wish to handle your child's questions. Here are some ideas about how you might respond:



What happened to my penis?

You never had one. Only a boy has a penis. A girl has a clitoris.



Can I see where the baby came out of you?

The baby came out through an opening between my legs called the vagina. I prefer not to show you my vagina because it's a private part of my body. Would you like to look at a book on how babies are born?



Why does Paul stand up to pee, and I have to sit?

It's easier for girls to urinate sitting down. Their “pee” - the real name is urine - comes out through a small opening near the vagina. A boy urinates from his penis.



Can I have a baby when I get big?

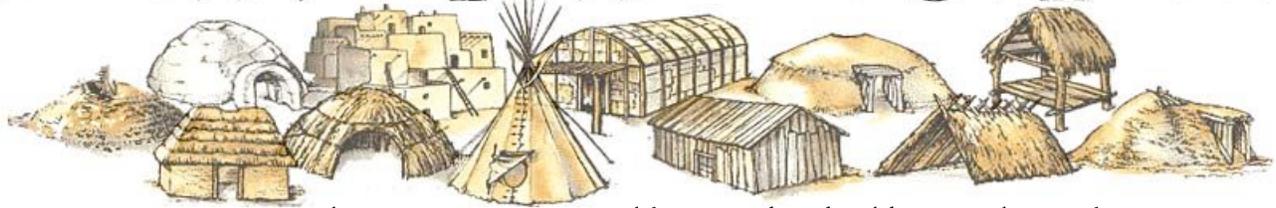
Only a woman can have a baby, Johnny. She has a special place in her body called the uterus where the baby grows. Daddies help to make babies. You can be a daddy when you grow up if you want to.

Children are seeking basic information at this stage, and deserve simple, *honest* answers. The important thing is for parents to respond in a supportive manner. It's a nice time to get a little practice. Take advantage of the easy questions now... it will help you respond to the hard ones later.

Talking about Touches

Sexual abuse is a very real threat to young children who often lack the vocabulary and language skills to communicate what has happened to them. You can help protect your children by helping them understand about touching. Sexual abuse comes in many forms and so it is important for your child to know when touch is appropriate or not appropriate. Examples of times when it might be appropriate for a grownup to touch your child's penis or vulva include at the doctors office or during bathing. It is also important to explain that a child should never be asked to touch the private parts of a grown up. Young children will often believe whatever a grownup tells them, and so it is important that your child hears from you first about what kinds of touch are okay and what kinds aren't!

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Show Me Yours and I'll Show You Mine...

At age 3, a child is intensely curious about bodies - and not just her own. There's particular fascination with sex differences and body functions. This interest may be demonstrated in a variety of ways: "playing doctor," wanting to watch mom/dad in the bathroom, genital play, comparing body parts to other gender friends or siblings.

Hmmm. Your 3-year-old Jenny and her little friend Will are playing quietly upstairs - *too* quietly. What are those kids up to? Uh-oh. Jenny's door is closed. Resisting the urge to waltz right in (you've been teaching her about privacy these days - respecting closed doors and all that), you knock. Giggling bubbles up from within Jenny's room and you think you hear a faint "come in"... so you do. There stand Jenny and Will thoroughly enjoying that classic preschool pastime, "playing doctor." They have shed their clothes and are busily examining each other.



Now what do you do?!

Option 1- You could respond with shock and anger:

"What are you two doing? Put your clothes on *right now*, and don't ever let me catch you at that again! Will, I'm taking you home!"

Message: The children are bad; curiosity about bodies is wrong; nudity is wrong. This of course leaves the children feeling confused, ashamed and hurt. After all, they were just acting on a normal 3-year-old's interest in bodies.

Option 2- Perhaps you remain unruffled and acknowledge the children's curiosity:

"It looks like you two are interested in how boys' and girls' bodies are different. While you put your clothes on, I'll get a picture book we can look at that explains all about bodies."

Message: It's ok to be curious about bodies; I prefer you keep your clothes on; I'm willing to help you learn.

There are a number of ways a parent might react to this type of situation. **When choosing your response, remember to see the behavior from a child's perspective.** Pre-school children are fascinated with bodies. Their desire to check out the differences between "yours and mine" is a natural part of their developing sense of self and sexual identification.

Since "playing doctor" is universally popular among young children, it's likely you'll be dealing with it in your own family. Plan your response ahead of time, keeping in mind the messages you wish to express. In this way, rather than reacting in a knee-jerk, perhaps negative manner, you can offer a thoughtful, positive response.

A final thought...

No matter how you deal with this situation, it's important to discuss it with the other child's parents. They may or may not agree with how you handled things, but will appreciate being informed. It gives them a chance to convey their own family values and beliefs to their child.

HELP!!!

Relax. There's a lot of help out there... in the form of books, films, classes, and resource people. Community schools and colleges may offer parenting classes that include sexuality education. Planned Parenthood is an excellent source of speakers, books and pamphlets. Your local Indian Health Service, your county health department, private physicians, family counselors and spiritual leaders and especially elders all have valuable insights into family-based sexuality education.