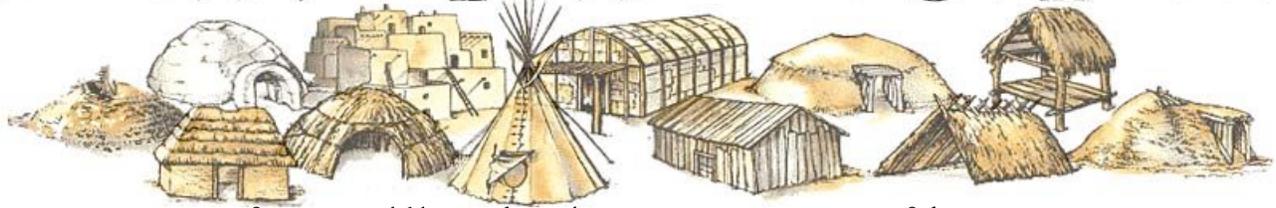


There's No Place Like Home ... for Sex Education



Age 4

A four year old learns by asking questions ... LOTS of them!

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Sex Is No Secret to a Four Year Old

Just how much sexuality education has your child had by age 4? Plenty. And where has most of it come from? Probably you... hopefully in thoughtful, purposeful and loving ways.

Families are teaching about sexuality every day...from the moment their child is born. Showing love and affection to children - touching, hugging, cuddling...these are all ways of giving positive messages about sexuality.

How parents and caregivers respond (or not) to a child's natural curiosity about sexual differences, body parts, where babies come from, etc. – certainly these present loud and clear messages about sexuality.

Beyond the home front, children also receive plenty of sex education - some of it negative, or at least questionable. Media messages about sex bombard the

senses...from billboards to TV, magazines and music. You may think your 4-year-old is oblivious to these messages. S/he isn't. So why not use them as opportunities to share your own values and attitudes around sexuality?

At age four, your child may not fully understand your message, but one thing will be clear: it's important to talk about sex openly and honestly.

Even at pre-school, children share lots of (mis)information about sex with each other. Some of their ideas can be pretty wild... and they may not check them out with you.

Considering all this "sex education" that goes on with or without parent consent, you'd be wise to get your two cents worth in too!

Wait a Minute. Haven't We Discussed This?

Don't be surprised if your 4-year-old's sexual questions are the very ones you thought were taken care of when s/he was three. Throughout your child's early years, you will be called upon to repeat the same "sexplanations" again and again... and yet again. A 4-year-old learns by asking questions - LOTS of them!

As you respond to sexual questions **patiently**, **openly**, and **honestly**, you let your children know:



"You're important to me. I am willing to take time with you," and

"I'm glad you asked me. This is a good topic for us to talk about."

Your child's sexual curiosity may surface at the most inopportune times: during dinner at grandma's, at a ceremony, in line at the checkout stand. If you're unwilling to discuss it at that moment, let your child know it's the *timing* that's bad, not the *question*. "I'm glad you asked me, Michael. We'll have time to talk about it on the way home." This is far more supportive and positive than a stern "Hush, Michael!" or worse yet, silence.

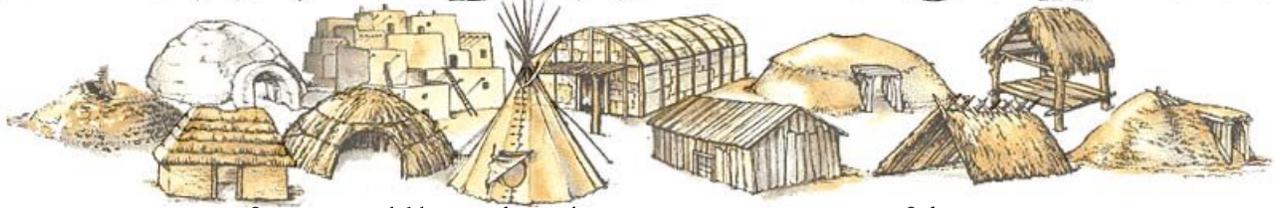
So your child's questions cause a bit of embarrassment, or the timing's awkward. Be happy s/he feels comfortable asking you.

When young children don't ask mom and dad about sex, it isn't that they're not curious.

Typically they've learned it isn't ok to ask, or that the subject causes discomfort. Having such feelings reinforced as they grow up, children often turn elsewhere to satisfy their sexual curiosity... to friends, the media, personal experimentation. The unfortunate result is misinformed, vulnerable youth.

Clearly, parents want to provide (and children want to receive) information and guidance in the area of sexuality. You can make that happen!

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Curiosity about Bodies and Nudity

"At what point do I insist that my child - or my partner - wear clothes around the house?" Parents often wonder what impact nudity in the family has on children.

While their children are young, many parents have a relaxed attitude about nudity. Beyond the toddler stage however, especially with children of the other gender, parents may begin to question its appropriateness. Parents should examine their comfort level around being undressed in front of their children. Comfort suggests a feeling of "ok-ness" or self-acceptance about the body. This is a healthy attitude for children to learn.

During pre-school years, nudity among family members in natural situations (taking a shower, getting undressed) provides opportunities for children to find out about body parts and sexual differences... between males and females, kids and grown-ups.

If parents are uncomfortable being undressed around their children, they can certainly use another method, such as picture books, to teach about bodies. It's important to talk with children about when and where nudity may be appropriate (ie. at home, with family members vs. in public

places). A natural follow-up could be a discussion about respecting privacy.

Often the whole question of nudity in the home takes care of itself when the young child (perhaps as early as age 4) begins to act a bit more modestly. S/he may be less inclined to be seen undressed in front of others, and may even prefer that parents remain clothed. Families should respect those feelings.

Realize too, that many children may be quite comfortable with nudity in the family, even through their elementary school years. Often as children grow older, they will ask for explanations about why things they did when they were younger aren't okay anymore. For example:

Q. Mommy, why can't I take showers with you anymore? Steven showers with his mom.

A. That's something each family decides on, David, depending on what they feel ok about. I like having my privacy now when I shower.

This is reinforced when parents in turn respect their children's right to privacy.

Reinforce the importance of respecting the privacy of others by showing your child that you respect his or her privacy.

 Knocking on a closed door, allowing private use of the bathroom - these let your child know you honor his/her wish for privacy.

Somebody's Sleeping in My Bed

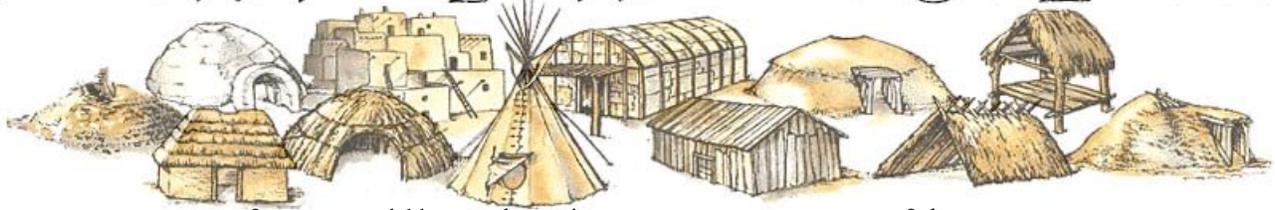
Even at four years of age, many children love to climb into bed and snuggle with their parents. It's safe, warm, cozy... all those things that feel good to a little one. Some parents worry about allowing their children into bed with them. **Many experts discourage parents from routinely allowing their children to sleep with them. Yet there's certainly no harm in a morning family cuddle in bed.** It can be a great time to talk, read a book, and tell stories... all good fun and sharing time.

If your 4-year-old is wanting to sleep with you, try to find out why. Maybe she's afraid of the dark and dislikes being alone in her room; maybe he's feeling the need for more attention or physical closeness to you.

Once you've identified the underlying reason behind your child's request, you can then attend to the real issue. Satisfying the basic needs of the child (security, love, etc.) will often resolve his/her desire to sleep with mom and dad.



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Speaking of Privacy...

You forgot to remind Ricky not to enter your bedroom without knocking; or maybe he's concerned about the noises, and thinks mommy and daddy are fighting. Whatever the reason, there he stands. You're caught in "the act!"

Keep your cool!

While it's the ultimate challenge for parents to remain cool under such circumstances, it's important that they do so.

AVOID:

- **Yelling** ("What are you doing here? Get back to your room!") or
- **Scolding** ("How dare you come into our room without knocking!")

Acting this way causes Ricky to feel hurt and shame. Add this to the confusion he's experiencing, and you may have a very upset, frightened child.

INSTEAD TRY TO:

- **Stay calm and reassuring** ("Daddy and I are playing together and loving each other. This is our private time, so please go back to your room.")
- **Reinforce respect for privacy** at a later time ("Remember, when our door is closed, please knock and wait for us to say 'come in'.")

Through a child's eyes and ears, intercourse can seem like "daddy is hurting mommy." If caught in the act, parents need to be calm and reassuring. Later, parents can follow up, repeating that mom and dad were playing and loving each other, not fighting. It's also a chance to reinforce respect for privacy. Handled with understanding and love, this can be yet another "teachable moment" (although a challenging one) for providing valuable lessons about sex.

What Did You Say!?

Dad says (or rather, hollers): "Mary! Don't ever let me hear you say that word again!" *He wants Mary to learn that "dirty" language is unacceptable.*

Mary thinks: "Ok. I'll only say it when you're not around." *She realizes that certain words make daddy holler. She's not sure why. She doesn't know what the words mean... or why they're not ok. What's really confusing is, why doesn't daddy holler at mommy or his friends when they use those words? And why does he say them?*

Now... how successful do you think dad has been in getting his message across to Mary? Typically, parents are upset when their children repeat "dirty" words they've heard at pre-school (or at home, for that matter). In deciding how to respond, it's helpful to understand the reasons a child may be using those words:

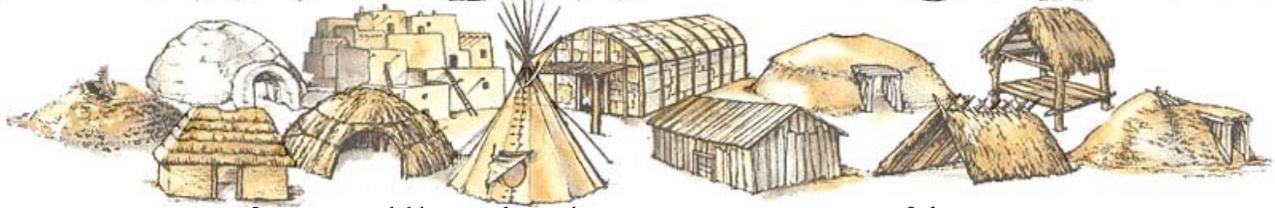
S/he wants attention: In this case, the parent may choose to ignore the initial use of such language.

S/he wants information: A young child often uses inappropriate language without knowing what it means. S/he may sense the word is shocking or provocative, and want confirmation. A parent might ask, "**Mary, what does that word mean?**" **then offer the correct definition.** "**Is that what you want to say?**" This response neutralizes the word, provides information, and demonstrates the parent's willingness to talk about sexual issues/terminology, etc.

S/he is angry/frustrated: It's important that parents acknowledge those feelings, and help the child choose alternative words to express them. "**You sound angry. That's ok, but I don't like the words you're using. Can you think of different words to show your anger?**"

Certain parent responses can be counterproductive, resulting in a child's continued use of offensive language: laughing implies the behavior is cute or funny; strong reaction and severe punishment may lead a child to become angry or resentful; ignoring the behavior for an extended period of time implies that it's acceptable. Finally parents and caregivers need to remember to monitor their own language. Since young ones love to imitate grown-ups, it's unrealistic to expect they'll parrot only "correct" behavior.

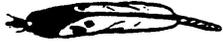
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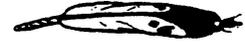
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Protecting Children from Sexual Abuse



It's an unfortunate reason to talk to the kids about sexual issues - and it's a compelling one. Sexual abuse: a subject we shudder to even think about, much less talk about. One of the most concealed and most disturbing crimes against children, sexual abuse occurs far more frequently than we'd like to believe. In mainstream society, an estimated 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 10 boys, or more, are sexually abused during childhood. Ten percent of all victims are less than six years of age. Estimates are much higher for Native children. Our cultural teaching of respect for elders can backfire sometimes with children fearing that they are disrespecting their culture and community by reporting an elder who has abused them. Additional challenges faced by our communities such as drug and alcohol abuse also increase the impact of sexual abuse on our communities and reservations.

Over 70% of these cases involve a person known by the child, such as a step-parent or babysitter; almost half of the abusers, the overwhelming majority of whom are male, are family members.

Sexual abuse and rape was a weapon of our oppressors, and we as Native people are still healing from that historical trauma experienced by our ancestors. The cycle of sexual abuse continues through generations and yet it is our own inability to communicate about it that allows it to continue. Open and honest communication about sexuality and sexual abuse is essential to heal our people and protect our children.

One of the best approaches to protecting children against sexual abuse is to help them be empowered. To do this, they need awareness, knowledge and skills:

Explain the difference between good and bad touching.

- Tell your child that **good touch feels comforting, pleasant and welcome...** (examples might be hugging or cuddling - as long as it is appropriate and with permission)
- **bad touch hurts physically or is uncomfortable in some way** (being pinched; having someone touch your penis/vulva when you don't want them to; a hug that is too tight - or forced upon you).

Impress on your child that ***"your body is your own, and you have the right to say 'no' if anyone touches you in a way you don't like."***

Allow your child to decide whether s/he wants to give or receive hugs and kisses. Insisting that Jimmy kiss grandpa is unfair. Offer affection to your youngster rather than impose it. Substitute ***"Can I have (or give you) a hug?" for "Give me a hug."*** This helps your child feel a sense of control over his/her body.

Emphasize that no adult or older child has the right to touch a child's penis (vulva, etc), or to ask a child to touch his/her genitals. Explain that this includes family members. ***"I need you to tell me if that ever happens. It's important that you let me know... and not be worried that I might be upset."***

Tell your child s/he does not have to blindly obey all adults. ***"It's wrong for a grown-up to ask you to lie or steal. It is wrong for a grown-up to touch you, or ask to be touched, in the bad ways we talked about. You should say 'no,' then come tell me."***

Differentiate between "secret" and "surprise." A "surprise" is something which is ok to reveal at some point (like a birthday present); **tell your child s/he should not be told to keep secrets from you.**

Practice "what if" with your child. ***"What if a stranger asked you to help find her lost dog; or the babysitter promised you more ice cream if he could touch your penis/vulva? What would you say/do?"*** Rehearse exact words and actions to help your child react in uncomfortable or threatening situations.

These suggestions merely scratch the surface. Several excellent resources are available to help parents and children prevent sexual abuse: Call your local Indian Health Service, Tribal Resource Center, Planned Parenthood, health department, physician or sexual assault center for additional suggestions.

The point is that awareness, communication, and assertiveness serve a child well.

Instill these in your children, and you promote their protection and safety.