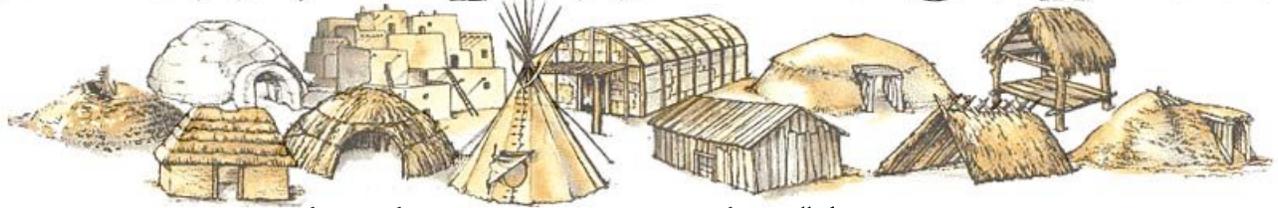


There's No Place Like Home ... for Sex Education



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By age 5, your child has a good idea about where you stand on the subject of sex...

and whether it's ok to even *talk* about it. From birth, children receive an array of messages about sexuality from their parents/caregivers:

- **infants** who are held and cuddled learn about loving touch;
- **toddlers** exploring their bodies quickly discover their sexual parts - and their parents' reactions to their exploration;
- the **pre-schooler** who asks her dad, "Where's *my* penis?" becomes aware if sexual questions are ok to discuss (or not) in her family.

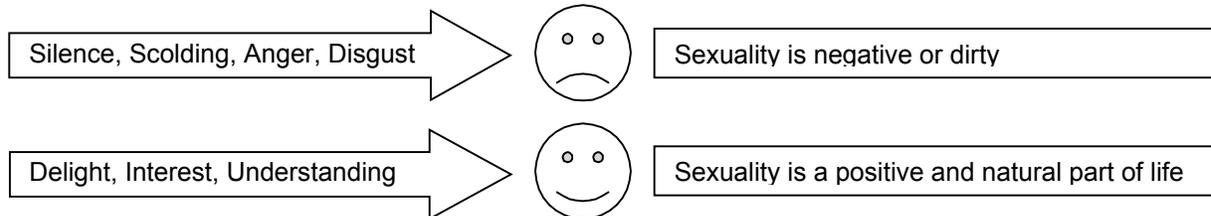
Your 5-year-old has had a bit of experience in the world: interactions with family; exposure to other children and differing beliefs; TV, movies, the Internet, magazines, advertising, music... All of these things influence the developing sense of sexuality, either directly or indirectly. **Children cannot avoid the sexual messages that permeate life today.**

Natural situations, everyday moments and events lend themselves to a child's sex education. With or without your consent they occur, as the life and learning processes of your children unfold.

You can help your child develop a healthy attitude about his or her sexuality by responding to questions in a loving, honest way, thereby teaching that sexuality is a wonderful part of being human.

Ways you respond to your child's questions about sexuality:

Message your child gets:



Open and honest family talks about sex create trust and allow parents to pass along important family and cultural values. Children have the opportunity to gain accurate information and a positive regard for sexuality.

The time to start this dialogue is early - earlier in fact than many parents would suspect. In today's complex world, perhaps even more so than in the past, children need and deserve thoughtful, purposeful sex education **from day one**. But it's never too late to begin. And while you as a parent will not be your children's *only* sex educator, you can be (and *are*) their **first and most important**.

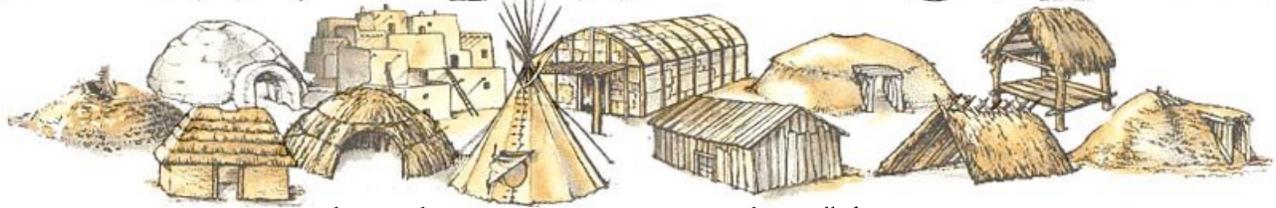
"Worried about how people will react to your openness with your child about sex?"

"But what if he goes around the rez, sharing this information with all his friends? Then what?"

Everyone has his/her own feelings about sexuality and about messages that are appropriate for children. Chances are you'll find family members, friends and neighbors whose ideas and values are very different from your own. This can challenge your resolve to communicate openly and honestly with your child about sex. It may help to keep in mind what's at stake here... and **what's more important: your child's needs, or the opinion of others?**

It is **IMPORTANT** for your child to be able to depend on you to respond to sexual questions and concerns with respect, support and honesty, regardless of what other people think. Let's face it. Kids frequently compare information with each other about sex, whether parents want them to or not. Usually it's *misinformation*. The bottom line here is that children deserve quality sex education. Parents need not apologize for providing that education - no matter *who* objects.

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Here We Go Again... "I know I've already answered that question"

The sexual curiosities of your 5-year-old aren't so different from the ones at ages 3 and 4. You may think, "I'm *sure* I told you where babies come from," or "We've already discussed what "belly-buttons" are all about, remember?" Your 5-year-old probably *doesn't* remember. There's so much to learn... and this is complex stuff. Maybe your child *does* remember (sort of), and is just checking to make sure it's still ok to talk about sexual issues with you. Please be patient and supportive.

The goal of family sex education goes beyond the mere presentation of facts. **Ideally, families seek to nurture in their children positive attitudes toward their bodies, gender, and sexuality.** One way to do this is to continue to be "askable" ... encourage sexual questions, acknowledge and discuss sexual behaviors, and initiate conversations about sexual issues.



Different families and tribes have different values and attitudes

As your 5-year-old becomes more involved with others (in pre-school, kindergarten, etc.), s/he will also be exposed to differing family attitudes and values. It can be terribly confusing, so it's important that parents reemphasize personal beliefs and values. For example:

Johnny: *Scott's Dad got really mad today. He yelled at us for taking our clothes off.*
Dad: *What did he say?*
J: *He said we were nasty. We told him we were just pretending to be doctors, but he yelled at us again and made us put on our clothes.*

COMPARE

Scott's dad was alarmed at seeing his son and another boy undressed, looking at and touching each other's body. Perhaps he worried this was "abnormal," maybe he was upset because he believes nudity is inappropriate. His anger left the children feeling hurt, ashamed and "nasty."



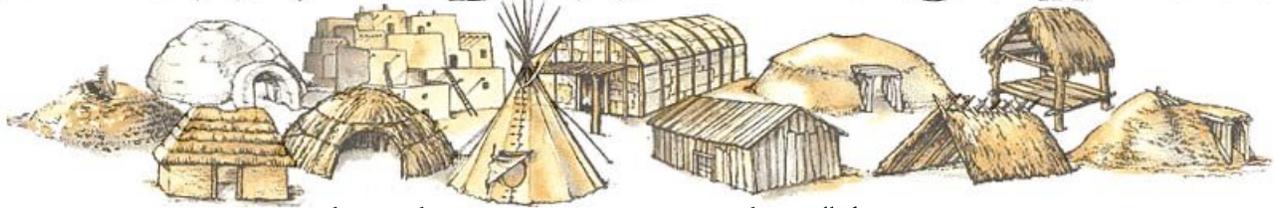
Johnny's dad believes that "playing doctor" is a normal childhood experience - between same *and* other gender children. At this age, they're fascinated by bodies - how they look, feel, work ... and are especially interested in "how yours compares to mine."

- He realizes that often parents forget that a child's sexual behavior does not have the same emotional significance that it does for adults.
- He also appreciates that families have different values and beliefs surrounding sex.
- His concern right now is to restore Johnny's positive feelings about himself, his body and his sexuality.

Dad: *Why do you suppose Scott's dad was so angry?*
Johnny: *He thought we were being nasty.*
D: *Do you think you were?*
J: *No.*
D: *Neither do I. You and Scott were interested in finding out about bodies. That's pretty normal.*
J: *Scott's dad thinks it's bad.*
D: *Well, he may believe it's not ok for kids to play without their clothes on. Some families feel that way. So when you're playing with Scott, be sure to respect that, and keep your clothes on. It's ok to be curious about bodies. In fact, I have a book that shows all kinds of bodies, and how they work. Let's read it!*

Johnny has heard some valuable messages: his dad reinforced his willingness to discuss sexual issues with him and emphasized a positive attitude toward sexuality. He acknowledged that family beliefs differ, and it's important to respect that. Good work, dad!

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Another Tough One ... Masturbation – Facts You Should Know

There's no right or wrong answer for the question of masturbation. Each family must make a decision based upon personal values and beliefs. Along with this guideline, consider the following:

- Most children fondle their genitals - often when they're tired, bored, nervous - as well as for pleasure!
- Masturbation is normal; not masturbating is also normal.
- There is no physical or psychological harm associated with masturbation. If a child masturbates excessively (interfering with other normal activities), it may indicate a problem. Parents would want to call their physician or health care provider.
- In most Native cultures, masturbation is considered natural and healthy. However, every family has different religious and cultural values. It is important to explain your values to your child in a calm and loving way.

If you disapprove of masturbation:

Express to your child why you disapprove without causing your child to feel ashamed or guilty.

If you accept that masturbation is a normal activity:

Help your child understand the concepts of appropriate time and place: *"I know it feels good to touch your genitals. But do so in private - not where others can see you."* This sets important limits for the child.

For some parents, masturbation may never be a comfortable topic to discuss, yet it's important to do so. If parents merely ignore the behavior or try to divert the child's attention with a toy or different activity, they've missed an ideal "teachable moment" to share information and values.

Talk About HIV/AIDS with a 5-Year-Old? You're Kidding, Right?

As parents of a kindergarten age child, you're totally baffled. **Just *what* and *how* do you discuss HIV/AIDS with a 5-year-old?** Your child doesn't need confusing details about the complexities of sexual relationships, sexual transmission of infection, etc. S/he *does*, however, need you to address this scary topic that everyone's talking about. It's an ideal time to discuss general concepts of wellness and staying healthy.

Help your child appreciate that much of his health is under *his* control. Habits such as hand-washing, dressing appropriately, eating nutritious foods, exercising, and getting plenty of rest promote good health.

Discuss basic facts about disease: Some diseases like colds, flu, and chicken pox are caused by germs, which spread from person to person. If those germs get into his body, he may become ill. Ask if he has heard of AIDS (he'll likely say yes). Let him know that AIDS is a disease caused by a germ called a virus. This may suffice for now, but continue the conversation if he shows interest or anxiety.

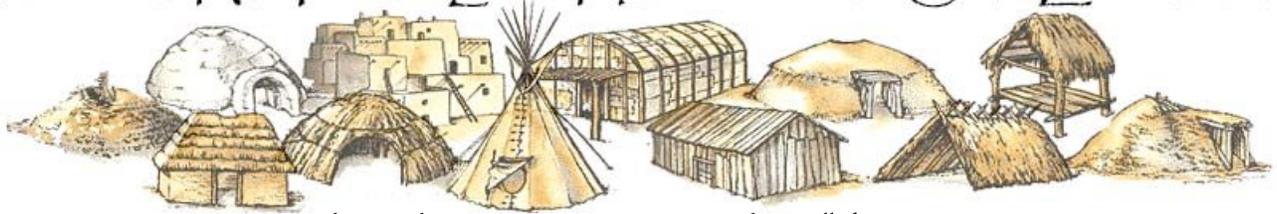
Find out what s/he's heard about HIV/AIDS, and correct any misinformation. Contact your child's school to see how teachers are dealing with the subject. Discussions at home can build upon information s/he's learning in school.

Appropriate messages about HIV/ AIDS for a 5-year-old:

- AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV.
- Some viruses like HIV can only spread in special ways (for example, by blood from an infected person getting into another person's body).
- We don't have to avoid people who are HIV+ or who have AIDS. HIV is **not** easy to get. It is **not** spread by casual contact (e.g., shaking hands, hugging, sharing food, etc.).

We can't ignore the subject of HIV/AIDS and other STDs. Neglecting or refusing to discuss this with children may only cause unnecessary alarm. On the other hand, initiating discussion can help ease their fears while providing important information to protect their health. At the same time, you're reinforcing open family communication about sexual issues.

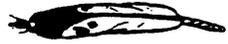
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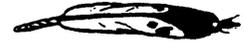
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Pregnancy/Childbirth 101 ~ The Baby-Making Process



Little ones are fascinated by the baby-making process. **Most 3- and 4-year-olds are interested in how baby “gets out of mommy.” Your 5-year-old’s concern is a bit trickier: “how baby gets in.”**

Not one to put curiosity on hold, s/he’s likely to insist on an explanation while you’re eating at a restaurant, selling popovers at a Pow-wow, shopping for groceries, or at some equally inconvenient spot.



Should the time or place be awkward for such discussion, say so - while at the same time supporting your child’s interest. A parent might say, “What a wonderful question! Let’s talk about that when we get home.” (Then do!)

Brief explanations about intercourse are appropriate for the 5-year-old.

Many parents are tempted to get themselves off the hook by telling their children fables and magical stories of babies being found on door steps or being brought by animals. Some of these stories are an important part of our tribal heritage and we owe it to our children to tell them.

We also owe our children honest and accurate information. So in addition to our Native stories we also must explain the simple truths of reproduction. If we share accurate information with our children in addition to our cultural stories, our children will learn to trust us and respect our values. Not responding honestly to sexual curiosities adds to a child’s confusion or discomfort about the issue.

A parent may simply choose to say: **“When a mother and father want to have a baby, the father puts his penis into the mother’s vagina. This is very loving and special. Sperm made by the father’s body move through his penis into the mother. If a sperm meets an egg cell made by the**

mother’s body, a baby will start to grow inside the mother’s uterus.”

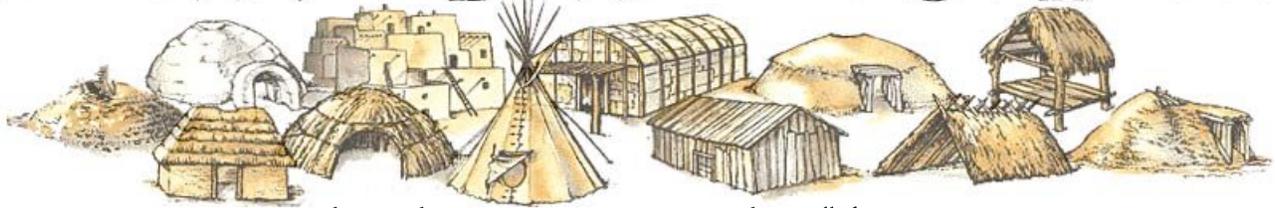
When providing this detail, keep in mind that a 5-year-old is very literal. The term “egg” needs clarification, lest your child envisions mommy producing chicken eggs. Remember too, the correct word “sperm” rather than “seed” avoids the notion of flowers blooming in mommy’s uterus.

Some Native American grandparents have shared that seeing animals mate is a “teachable” moment they have used to help their grandchildren understand the circle of life and reproduction. The natural world is full of these teachable moments if we only watch for them. Our children are certainly watching and waiting for us to share our values and knowledge.



If you’ve successfully made your way through the baby-making talk, congratulations! The topic’s not been laid to rest, however - just as you suspected. Your 5-year-old will ask this one several more times (over the next few years) before s/he’s gotten it straight. You can look forward to a lot more practice. Even if the baby-making talk doesn’t go so well, that’s okay. Keep trying! There are lots of resources available to help you. Your local library is a great place to start. Seek guidance from community elders about ways to talk to your child about reproduction. You owe it to your child to provide honest and accurate information.

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When Children Don't Ask . . .

Find teachable moments to educate your child about sexuality. If your 5-year-old doesn't seem the least bit interested in sexual issues and hasn't asked any questions, it's time to initiate discussion. The easiest way to begin is with "teachable moments" - everyday events that lend themselves to conversations about sexuality (a neighbor is pregnant; the hamsters are mating, etc.). Make deliberate attempts to educate your child:

- Children's **picture books** on sexuality can be wonderful! Read them together.
- Look at **family albums** with pictures of weddings, of mom - when she was pregnant, or pictures of the new baby coming home.
- Comment on a **news item** that deals with sexuality.
- Watch **movies/TV** together. Ask your child to draw a **picture** that shows a baby being born.
- Talk about the process.

You might consider that your child has indeed been asking about sexuality - often in non-verbal ways - since birth. You may not have recognized it as such, or perhaps you've given an impression that it's not ok to ask. Whatever has or has not been going on, start something now. Your children are learning about sex whether you tell them or not. Surely you want to get your 2¢ worth in too!

Talking about Moon Time ...

Jim: *Hey dad, do you use tom-toms sometimes too?*

Dad: *What do you mean, Jim?*

J: *You know, **tom-toms**. Like mom has.*

D: *Jimmy, tom-toms are drums. Mom has drums?*

J: *No...come on. I'll show ya.*

With that, Jimmy drags dad to the bathroom, opens the cabinet and pulls out a blue box. Dad's face breaks into a grin. "Oh **those!** They're called **tampons**, not **tom-toms!**"

Why clutter up a 5-year-old's head with talk of menstruation - and a boy at that! Well... because he asked. While shopping with his mom, Jimmy saw her pick up a box of tampons. Naturally curious, he asked about them - and, valuing family communication about sexual issues, his mom explained. Jimmy has since forgotten what "tom-toms" are all about, so he's asking dad.

Dad: *Do you know what tampons are for, Jimmy?*

Jim: *Mom told me, but I forget.*

D: *Well, each month, inside a woman's uterus, a special lining grows. If the woman becomes pregnant, that lining is needed to help the baby grow and develop. If the woman doesn't become pregnant, the lining passes out of her body through the vagina. It's called having a period or Moon time. The lining has blood in it, and the tampon is placed in the vagina to catch the blood so it doesn't stain her clothes. The bleeding is very normal. Make sense?*

J: *Well, sort of.*

D: *Only women have Moon times, so I don't need to wear tampons - and neither will you.*

A young child might be alarmed if s/he discovers a used tampon or sanitary pad. Associating blood with injury, s/he may fear mom is hurt. So it's important to give children accurate information. Besides the fact that Jimmy deserves an honest answer, his parents appreciate that he will be interacting with females throughout his life. He needs to understand how their bodies work, as well as his own. There's no point in keeping body functions a mystery. By explaining issues such as menstruation as normal and healthy, parents help children accept them as so. And remember, there are age-appropriate picture books on this and other sexual health topics that help young ones better understand what might be a complex subject.