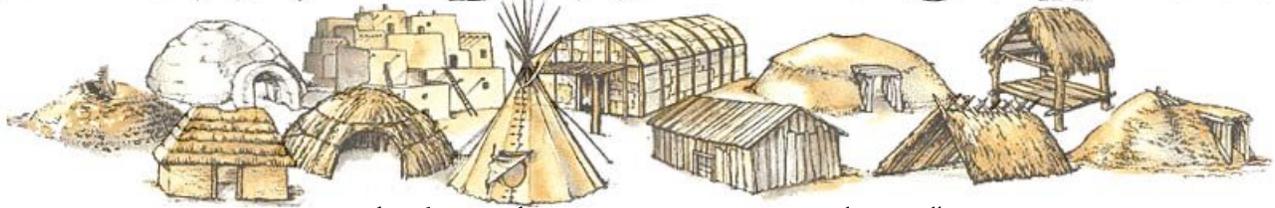


There's No Place Like Home . . . for Sex Education



Grade 1

Opening the door to honest communication. . . let's talk!

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Let's Talk

This is it. First grade - *real* school. The *big time*. Time to experience delight and pride as you watch your child learn, develop, grow. It's also a time when many parents feel a twinge (at least) of discomfort - some anxiety about the dose of outside influences to which their children will now be exposed.

First graders are gaining a stronger sense of themselves in relation to a larger social world; they begin to measure themselves against new friends and school acquaintances; what they see, hear and read makes an impression. The importance of having that backlog of trust and open communication with your child suddenly becomes perfectly clear - especially in the area of sexuality.

If such a history hasn't been established, it's not too late to begin. But please, **do begin now** - for the early years are critical as your child develops attitudes toward sexuality. And, it's far easier to initiate discussions about sex while children are young.

Open family discussions about sex can:

- allow parents to share important family values;
- assist children in forming a positive attitude and healthy respect toward sexuality;
- ease fears and anxieties children often have about sexual curiosity;
- build trust, understanding, and support;
- increase the likelihood that children will seek out parents for information and guidance in the future.

Your child is launching his school career. What better gift to give him than your commitment to support growth and understanding in *all* aspects of his personhood - including sexuality.

OK...Where Do I Begin???



Begin by appreciating where 1st graders are at with their sexual curiosity. At this age, many children are hesitant about asking questions related to sex. By the time they're six, children have developed a fairly perceptive radar alerting them to topics, behaviors, etc., that adults find unacceptable or uncomfortable. So they're wary of saying or doing things that might cause trouble.

The early grade school child is naturally curious about many sexual issues - *whether that interest is verbalized or not*. It is the wise parent who encourages communication.

You might try asking questions about sexual issues you think may be of interest to your child. For the 1st grader these usually include:

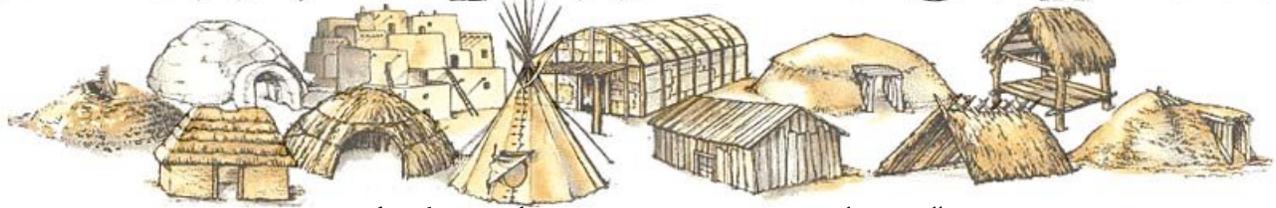
- where babies come from
- body parts/functions
- male/female differences, roles, and expectations
- sexual language

In discussing these issues, with your child, remember:

- **You are the expert** at passing along family values about sexuality. You do have the answers in your heart, though you may need some practice with the words.
- **Listen to your child's questions** - and be sure you understand what s/he's really asking.
- **Answer simply and honestly.**
- **You needn't worry about telling "too much, too soon."** Children absorb what they are ready to, and are not over stimulated, encouraged, or whatever by more detail. **The real danger lies in "too little, too late."**

Family sex education offers you, as parents, a wonderful opportunity to speak from the heart to the children you love. **Enjoy!**

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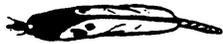
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Silent No More: Sexual Abuse is a Real Threat to our Children . . .

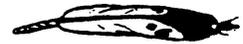
"Don't take candy from strangers." Remember the classic warning from your own childhood? Usually coupled with "Never talk to strangers," this rather vague precaution never quite spoke to one of mom's and dad's *true* concerns. Today, we don't dare skirt the issue. **We must talk with our children, in no uncertain terms, about sexual abuse.**

Studies suggest that **1 out of every 4 children in this country experiences some form of sexual victimization before age 17**; 15% - 20% are boys. Contrary to the early warnings of our own parents the typical child molester is *not* the stranger who entices children with candy. The majority of sexual abusers are adult heterosexual males who are rarely strangers. In fact, 70-80% are known to the child - and often are relatives.

By fostering self-reliance and assertiveness in their children, parents help protect them against sexual abuse. But what else can be done? First, families must abandon the idea that "it can't happen to me." Sexual abuse crosses all socio-economic lines, all religious and ethnic walks of life. On some reservations, studies have found rates of sexual abuse as high as 52% of girls and women. The historical trauma suffered by our people continues to be relived each time the cycle of sexual abuse repeats itself. Open and honest communication about sexuality and sexual abuse is essential to heal our people and protect our children.



Every child must learn safety information and skills



- Have your child use proper terms for body parts. Substitute "penis," "vulva," etc. for vague descriptors like "private parts" and "down there."
- Emphasize that your child's body is his own - no one has the right to touch him in ways he doesn't like. He has the right to say "no" to unwanted or uncomfortable touch.
- Let your child decide whether to be affectionate. Insisting upon hugs and kisses is unfair, and lessens a child's feeling of control over her own body.
- Explain that no adult has the right to touch a child's penis (vulva, etc.) or ask a child to touch his/her genitals. This applies to family members too (explain possible exceptions such as a parent helping at bath time).
- Tell your child she has the right to say "no" to any adult who asks her to do something wrong. "It's wrong for a grown-up to ask you to lie or steal; to touch you or ask to be touched in the ways we talked about. You should say 'no,' then come and tell me."
- Explain that no one should insist your child keep secrets from you. "If someone touches your penis/vulva, and warns you not to tell me, it may be because it was wrong for them to do that. Secrets and surprises are different. Surprises (like the present mom bought dad for his birthday) can eventually be told."

Practice the "WHAT IF" game with your child

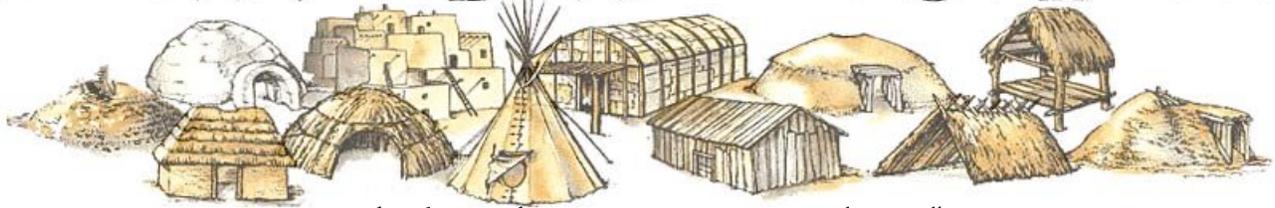
Here are some sample "WHAT IF" questions to get you started and space to write some of your own:

- *"What if the babysitter promised you could stay up later if you touched his penis?"*
- *"What if a stranger came to the door while I was in the shower?"*

Rehearse specific words and actions. Help your child know what to do if s/he feels threatened - where to go and names of trusted adults who can help if parents are not available.

Talking about sexual abuse isn't easy. You worry about frightening the children, about what to say, how to say it. Much anxiety stems from the discomfort people often have about discussing sexual issues in general. In addition to the general tips offered here, there are excellent resources available through your local Planned Parenthood, Indian Health Service, Family Resource Center or sexual assault center.

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No Gender Limitations

"That's girl stuff," insists Tim when you ask him to help set the dinner table. "Boys aren't supposed to do girl stuff."

Cringing at the hint of superiority in his voice, you think, "Wait a minute. Where did *that* come from?" This isn't the non-sexist attitude you've encouraged in your son. Recently he's made several comments smacking of limiting male/female stereotypes. What's up with that?

The school-age child has ventured into a world where s/he is exposed daily to individuals with a lot of old habits. Historically, expectations - and *limitations* - based on gender have been a way of life in this society: one set of standards, values, and behaviors considered acceptable for boys; a different set established for girls. Our general attitude about this is changing, yet in many families, gender-limiting biases persist.

In some traditional Native cultures, male/female roles were fixed and responsibilities were divided between the sexes. Yet in other traditional Native societies, women and men shared responsibilities such as men cooking and women hunting. The gender stereotypes your son Tim brought home are probably values of mainstream

and not necessarily that of you, your tribe, or your culture. Just like mainstream society, some Native cultures have very sexist attitudes towards one gender or the other. Yet other Native cultures teach respect of both sexes. It is important to share and reinforce **your** cultural values with your child.

The "liberated male" you've been raising these last six years is beginning to feel the tugs of peer influence. For the most part, he'd rather hang out with the guys at school; their opinions about him carry a lot of weight. Pressures to conform, fit in, be one of the group (and *think* like the group) start competing with family influence.

It's an important time to remind the 6-year-old that **goals and expectations need not be limited by gender**. Help your child appreciate that both boys and girls are capable of a myriad of accomplishments. This can boost his/her self-esteem and foster personal growth.

To broaden your child's perspective regarding gender role expectations:

- **Share** household chores.
- **Read** stories portraying both males and females in a variety of non-limiting roles.
- **Use** language that avoids stereotyping (e.g., mail carrier rather than mailman, flight attendant instead of stewardess; he **or** she in reference to doctors, nurses, etc.) Awkward? Perhaps... but well worth the effort.

As parents work to expand their children's horizons, they may find themselves at odds with influences of the outside world. Rather than set up a "We're right, they're wrong" struggle, it's useful to approach it as "here's *another* way to look at things." Certainly in the arena of sex role expectations, it's empowering to offer children another way to look at things.

Talking about Offensive Language – "What Did You Say?"

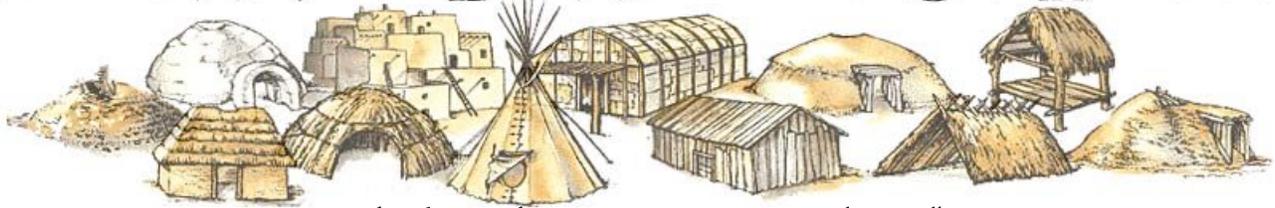
A 1st grader may use a "dirty" word without having the vaguest idea of its meaning. The word's an attention getter, and maybe that's all s/he wants. Or, s/he may be curious about the term, but unsure how to ask for permission to discuss it.

Either way, by calmly defining the word, parents *neutralize its shock value, provide accurate information, and reaffirm their willingness to discuss sexual issues*. A parent could say, for example: "That word is a mean way of saying _____. It's often intended to be hurtful. Please find other words to say what you're feeling."

If a child uses bad language out of anger, frustration, etc., it's helpful to let her know that while the emotion is perfectly acceptable, the language is not. Then assist her in finding alternate words to express her feelings. Finally, parents might want to monitor their own vocabulary. "Do as I say, not as I do" has little impact.

Model the behaviors you wish to encourage.

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But What If... Answers to Some of Your Concerns



Many parents admit to avoiding discussion of sexual issues with their children. With great relief, they'll seize any opportunity to get off the hook, assuming that somewhere along the line, kids will learn what they need to know. It's likely that these very same parents truly *want* to be involved in their children's sexuality education...yet feel ill-prepared to do so. Fear, confusion, and embarrassment are just a few barriers that often get in the way.

Let's see if the way can be smoothed a bit by addressing some of the concerns parents and caregivers have expressed:

I'm worried that giving my child too much sexual information will make him even more curious and encourage him to experiment. This is related to the fear of telling too much, too soon. The fact is, a child's interest in sexual issues needs no encouragement. That natural curiosity is alive and well from birth! When efforts to learn about sexuality are ignored, denied - or worse yet,

punished - children may become preoccupied with the subject, and more compelled to experiment.

But she's only in 1st grade. Isn't that too young? For lengthy, graphic detail? Of course. Your explanations can be simple, clear, and factual. At the same time, leave the door open for further discussion. Remember, now is the time to establish the foundation for open communication... an environment in which your child knows it is safe and appropriate to ask questions or voice opinions. Remember too that **every day your 1st grader hears a great deal about sexuality ...** from friends ... from the media ... S/he certainly deserves to hear it from you.

I don't want to frighten or confuse my child. Parents often voice this concern specific to topics such as sexual abuse, childbirth, etc. Truly, the bottom line is that children are more concerned and confused when they only have bits and pieces of information... or misinformation. It leaves much to their imagination, which can fabricate some rather frightening details. Know that by 1st grade, your child has heard *something* about sexual abuse, childbirth, etc., even if s/he has not heard it from you. It's best to introduce such topics, discuss them calmly and openly, and allow your child to express any concerns or questions.

I'm not sure I have my facts straight. That can be the *least* of your worries. If you don't know the answer, say so. Then offer to look it up. Better yet, suggest that the two of you go to the library or Internet, and look it up together. In addition to providing factual information, many excellent resources offer help in the "how to" department. Check with your local Planned Parenthood, Indian Health Service, or Tribal/Community Resource Center. Unfortunately, children are hearing the most about sex from friends and the media. Surely parents do not *prefer* this. When offered information, skills, assurance, and support, parents can embrace their role as family sex educators with confidence!

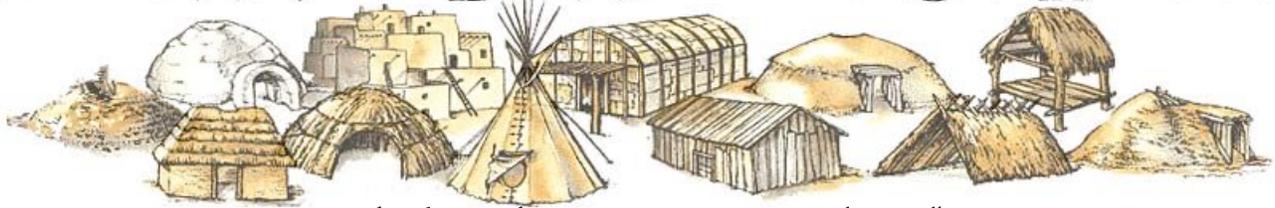
Intergenerational Disconnect and Historical Trauma

Some Native parents, grandparents, and other caregivers have expressed the concern that many basic parenting skills are never learned in tribes where children were raised in boarding schools. The boarding school experience is an important part of the past that continues to haunt our people in the present. Healing this historical trauma means recognizing the disconnect between the generations and beginning to rebuild those ties of trust and reliance. Whether you are a grandmother, uncle, biological parent or other caring adult, you are faced with a great challenge of helping heal the great hoop. You must help bring the circle of communication about healthy living back to our people by your teachings to the next generation.



Talking about sex and sexuality is particularly difficult for Native people because of the many traumas we've experienced. Many of us never learned the "facts" about sex and sexuality from a caring adult. Often distorted ideas have been carried for lifetimes. We can choose to put down the shame and fear of talking about sexual issues. We must make the choice to heal so we can protect and teach the children who will carry on our culture and values.

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It's All About Self-Concept

First grade is a big achievement for your child. Along with accomplishments, perhaps your first grader has also experienced some failure and frustration. How has s/he fared? As a whole, has the year been a joyful experience? A positive introduction to the academic world? And just *what* does any of this have to do with sex education? Plenty. It's all about self-concept.

You see, **research tells us that the sexual decisions and behaviors of adolescents are influenced in part by their feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.** High self-esteem correlates with an increased likelihood that choices will be positive, healthy, and responsible.

It is during the early years that children begin developing a sense of their "OK-ness."

The development of self-esteem during the pre-school years is based largely on input from the family. If Steven is constantly told he's a "bad boy," he'll soon define himself as such - and act accordingly. If, however, his parents emphasize that it is his behavior that is unacceptable (not Steven himself), he maintains his personal sense of "OK-ness" and self-respect.

Upon entering the educational system, a child is exposed to pressures, demands, and expectations that reach beyond the home front. It becomes especially important for parents to reassure their child that a sense of worth comes from within - and is not a function of appearance, being a math whiz, or getting the lead in the class play.

As with all other aspects of growth and development, children need assistance in feeling competent, connected, and valued. Through their childrearing practices, parents either foster or stifle that development.

Approval - Children have a special need for praise. For them, parents' approval is a measure of their own value. Frequently recognize and praise your youngster for a job well done or a good effort.

Acceptance - While recognizing your child's strengths and abilities, assist him in accepting his weaknesses. If he acts inappropriately, be sure he understands that while you do not like the behavior, you still love him.

Attention - By demonstrating sincere interest in your child's day to day activities, you let her know she is important. Having mom's and dad's undivided attention - however brief - helps a child feel very special indeed.

Achievement - Children learn by doing... and need opportunities to practice new skills. Allowing them to make decisions will encourage a sense of competence and responsibility.

Respect - *Children are people too*, and they deserve to be treated fairly - with dignity and respect.

All of this may seem so obvious. Yet it's amazing how much good, common-sense parenting gets lost in the daily bustle of family life. Consider this simply a reminder.

The way children feel about themselves colors the way they live and relate to the world around them. Children who grow up feeling loved, competent, and worthy are far better equipped - as adolescents and adults - to deal with the issues of life... including sexuality.