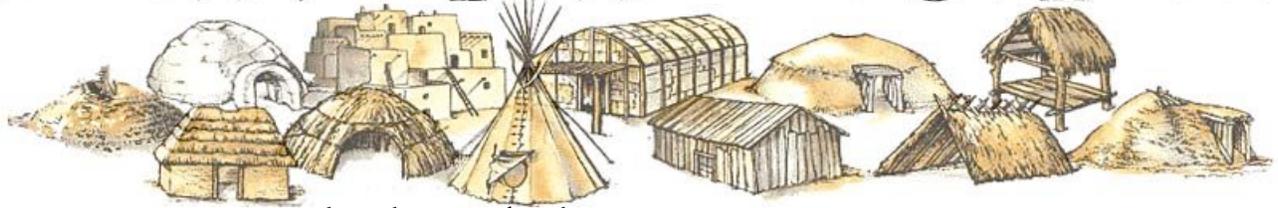


# There's No Place Like Home...for Sex Education



## Even in Elementary School, Kids Are Learning About Sex ...from Friends, Media...from ???

Surely, **they deserve to learn from a loving parent or guardian**. It should be no surprise to parents that young children gather lots of sexual (mis)information on a daily basis. Why, remember just last weekend when you stumbled upon Nick, your little 2nd grader and his buddy, Craig? They were having quite a chat... intense and lengthy whispers punctuated by fits of giggling. All of that came to an abrupt halt the moment they spotted you! Chances are good their conversation had something to do with sex.

And what about the movie you took the family to see the other day? You were careful to select an appropriate show for the children. What you hadn't counted on were the steamy coming attractions for next week's feature. You were more than a bit uncomfortable - and somewhat unnerved by Nick's obvious interest in the whole thing.

Let's face it. Your children are hearing about sexual topics whether you tell them or not. There are advantages to having you tell them. **You are the expert when it comes to passing along your family and cultural values related to sexuality**. You may need a little encouragement - some assistance in

overcoming your discomfort. Perhaps you'd like a few tips on how to begin - or how much to say. That's all fine-tuning. But **the heart of the message** - your values and attitudes surrounding sexuality - **is within you**.

When parents are actively involved in their child's sexuality education, they can ensure that accuracy prevails. **We know that children are exposed to massive doses of misinformation and exploitive, irresponsible messages about sex - from their friends... from the media...** So it makes good sense for parents to blaze a trail of honest, informative communication. Be available to dispel the myths, and set the record straight. (*Of course, be sure you have the facts straight yourself!*)

Ultimately, we wish for our children a sense of appreciation and high regard for their sexuality. We want them to enjoy and celebrate that very special part of their being. We want them to have self-respect - good feelings about themselves... *every part of themselves, including their sexuality*. What better way to promote that vision than by providing loving, thoughtful sex education at home and in the context of our cultural values.



### Media, Values and Sex

The U.S. has one of the most intensive sex education programs in the world. Sadly, it's not happening in homes and the classroom. It's broadcast in the media (TV, advertisements, music, Internet, etc.). Numerous studies show the potential for media to influence the knowledge and attitudes of young people:

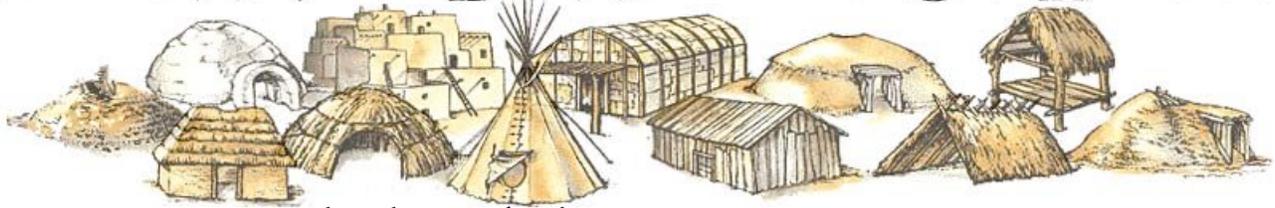
- By age 18, the average student has spent 15,000 hours watching TV as compared to 11,000 in school.
- A Junior Achievement study reports that media ranks 3rd behind peers and parents in influencing values and behaviors of youth.

Media messages replete with sexual references, innuendoes, and behaviors assault the senses. What's a parent to do? Demand censorship? Isolate children? While we can set boundaries, it's unrealistic to think these messages will be completely eliminated from our children's lives. *We can* however, monitor what children listen to, watch and read, what chat rooms and web sites they visit. **We can listen, watch and read along with them - then discuss it as a family**.

Rather than criticize and blame the media, use it to your advantage. It's a wonderful discussion starter! Call attention to sexual messages conveyed by programs, ads, music videos, web sites, etc. Ask your children how they feel about them, and share your own values surrounding the issue. The media "teaches" about a broad spectrum of sexuality-related concerns: relationships, stereotypes, sex roles, etc. Take note of these too.

**By helping young children recognize and examine media messages about sexuality, caring adults assist them in developing critical viewing skills. Not only does this equip children with a "filter" through which to process the messages, it also provides opportunity to strengthen family communication about sex.**

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## Now What Do I Say??? Handling Questions about Sexual Orientation and HIV/AIDS

**Dana:** Mom, what's "gay" mean?

**Mom:** Well... it depends how the word is used. (*good strategy...that bought you a little time*) Tell me what you've heard. (*nice... clarify what she's really asking*)

**Dana:** At school today, David called Max gay, and said he was going to get AIDS.

OK mom, that settles it. Dana's not referring to the happy-go-lucky "gay." It also sounds like she's wondering about both sexual orientation and HIV/AIDS. You're on. Consider this a great opportunity for you and Dana to have an informative discussion. I know, I know... you're a little nervous. OK - a *lot* nervous. Dana's only seven! She's asking some pretty sophisticated questions!

Kids *are* growing up fast these days. The AIDS crisis has sped up the process as the subject is frequently aired in the media - and in the schoolyard. It can be confusing and alarming to a 2nd grader. The good news is that this disease has created wonderful invitations for parents and kids to talk about sexual issues.

Dana's mom can be pleased that her daughter felt comfortable asking this question. By responding calmly and honestly, mom will reaffirm her willingness to discuss sexual topics with Dana. But, exactly *what* should she say? She might try something like this: "Some men have loving relationships with other men rather than women. That's called being gay. Some women have loving relationships with other women rather than men." She could also point out that these relationships are important and fulfilling for the couple. This may lead to further questions like, "Is that bad?" or "Why do people do that?"

Talking with children about sexual orientation can stir up complex emotions. In discussing this issue, parents can help their children avoid developing prejudices.

If a parent disapproves of homosexuality for religious or other reasons, s/he might say: "Families have different opinions about this. What I believe is..." No matter what, be sure your child clearly hears that it is never OK to hurt or discriminate against someone because of their sexual orientation.

Often, children repeat derogatory terms they've heard such as "fag", and may have little or no idea of the meaning. Parents can define the terms, explaining that they are cruel labels intended to hurt and tease.

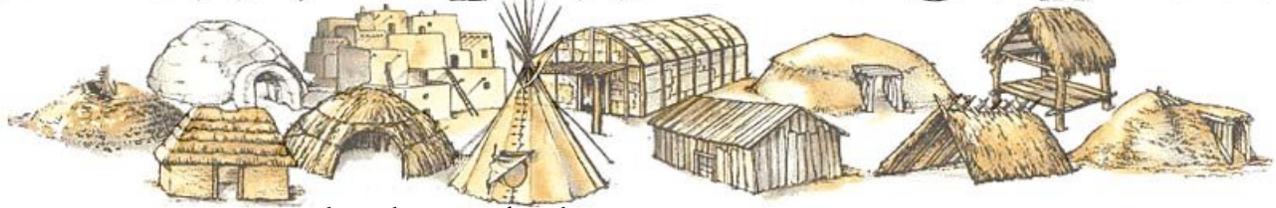
Dana has also raised the subject of AIDS. This is a hot topic, with a mix of fear and misinformation being passed back and forth. *It's best they have a chance to hear from a caring adult like you..*

Your 2nd grader can be told that:

- ◆ AIDS is a serious disease that is caused by a virus called HIV.
- ◆ The virus is passed from person to person *in specific ways*: for example, if someone has unprotected sexual intercourse with an HIV-infected person, or shares needles that are used for injected drug use with an infected person. Children should never come into contact with someone else's blood or pick up needles or syringes they find on the ground.
- ◆ AIDS doesn't just happen to people who are gay. It can happen to anyone who behaves in specific ways that might put them at risk. (Be prepared to further explain what those risky behavior include)
- ◆ We don't have to be afraid of people with AIDS. *The disease is not spread by casual contact.* We can hug them, share food with them, sit next to them, etc.
- ◆ AIDS can be prevented by being knowledgeable and making healthy choices.

As with all sexual issues, it's important to leave the door open for further discussion of AIDS. A good rule of thumb is "*if they ask the question, they deserve an honest answer.*" Young children may not need graphic detail. They do need to know they can depend on you to respond to their questions.

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## Sexplanations: You Thought That Was Hard - Wait 'Til You Try This...

Remember the days when, as a pre-schooler, your child showed great interest in how babies were made? At times you may have fretted that the interest felt more like preoccupation. In reality, your youngster was just naturally and appropriately curious about a fascinating subject.

**As a 2nd grader, your child may be no less fascinated by the baby making process** (although s/he is more sensible now about blurting out the question in a crowded elevator). **Resist the temptation to assume that your previous discussions have thoroughly covered the topic.** Despite the eloquent explanations you may have delivered in the past, the story bears repeating, yet again. You see, at this age children have some difficulty grasping the notion of intercourse. Even more confusing to them is “why *anyone* would want to do *that*.” And of course, the most incredulous wonder of all is that “since there are two kids in our family, mom and dad actually did that – twice!”

Talking with children about sexual intercourse in the context of making babies often causes some anxiety for parents. But really, it's pretty straightforward. On the other hand, **the thought of helping your child realize that mom and dad experience sexual intimacy for pleasure may stop you cold in your tracks.** *Is that ok to talk about?* Of course. It's important - and only fair - that children learn about this aspect of sexuality. **Parents are truly the ideal source of this information, for they can provide it within a framework of love and values.**

There are ample opportunities to bring up the subject of intercourse. Perhaps a neighbor is pregnant, you've just dug out your child's baby pictures, or there's a TV special on about pregnancy and childbirth. These “teachable moments” provide a springboard for discussion that might go something like this:

**Dad:** I'll never forget the day we told you mom was having another baby. You were about 4 - and so excited! You had a million questions about how babies are made.

**Son:** Did you tell me?

**Dad:** Of course! We explained that when a man and woman have intercourse, a sperm cell from the man's body may join an ovum - or egg cell - made by the woman's body. This is how a baby starts. Do you remember what intercourse is?

**Son:** I'm not sure.

**Dad:** When a man and woman want to be very close with each other in a special, loving way, the man puts his penis into the woman's vagina. That's called sexual intercourse.

**Son:** So people do that when they want a baby?

**Dad:** Yes, but that's not the only reason. People have intercourse to share a loving, pleasurable experience with each other. It may be hard for you to understand - and that's OK. Intercourse is not for children to do. It's a sexual sharing for adults.

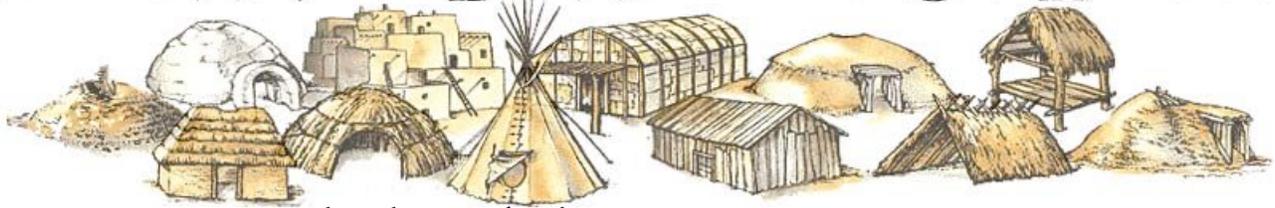
At some point in the not too distant future, you will want to begin discussing this issue in a much larger context: risks and responsibilities involved in sexual intimacy, the decision to become pregnant, teenage pregnancy, etc. Open and loving communication with your 2nd grader will help pave the way.

## You're Not Alone

Many parents say they have a harder time discussing the emotions, values... the “intangibles” of sexuality with their children than they do talking about the mechanics. Seeing and hearing some ways to go about dealing with the “intangibles” may be helpful. Beyond books, what other assistance is available something with a more personal touch?

- **Community schools and colleges** frequently offer parenting classes including aspects of sexuality education.
- **Physicians, family counselors, and spiritual leaders** may also provide valuable insights.
- **Your child's school or the local school district office** may have suggestions on programs available for parents.
- **Planned Parenthood** is an excellent source of education programs and materials.
- **Indian Health Service** or Tribal Resource Center may have programs and educational materials.

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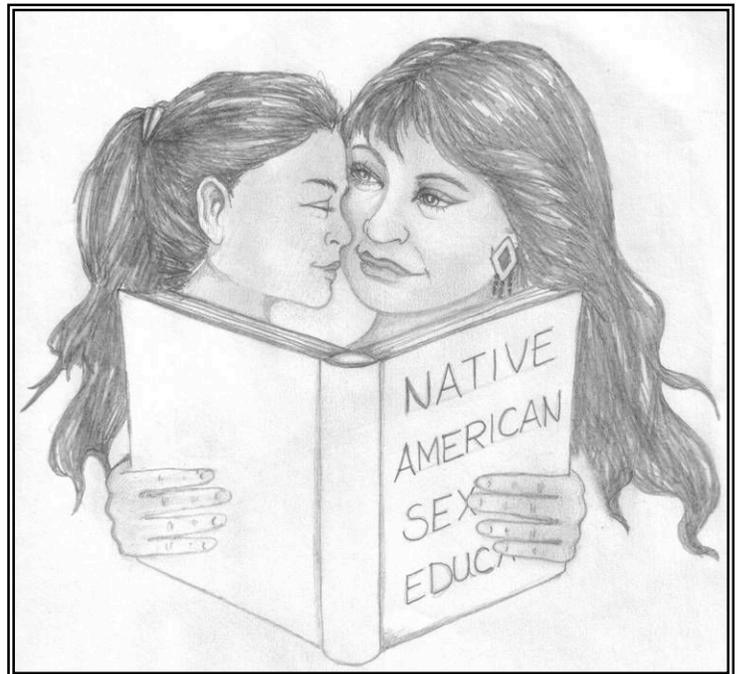
## More Than Meets the Eye

When you think about sex education, what topics come to mind? Anatomy... intercourse... pregnancy... puberty...? Anything else? While these are all components of sex education, they're only a *tiny fraction* of the subject. These are the issues that relate to the plumbing part of sexuality - or as some kids call it, the "organ recital." You know ... the mechanics.

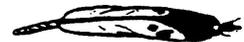
Let's **consider sexuality education in much broader terms**, consisting of all of the above, as well as issues like **body image, self-esteem, love, relationships, respect for self and others, values, decision-making**, and much, much more. It is truly a massive, complex, and fascinating subject. As a parent or guardian, you routinely address these issues within your family in many ways. While doing so, you're also providing the bricks and mortar for your child's developing sexual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

**It's all a matter of "sex" vs. "sexuality":** *sex* being a fairly narrow term, usually meaning either gender or intercourse; *sexuality* referring to that integral part of our being which defines who we are as males or females; our attitudes, values, and feelings around that; and how this affects our relationship to the world - and the world to us.

**A tremendous amount of sexual curiosity and learning has occurred for your 2nd grader over the last 8 or so years, whether you've taken an active, positive role or not.** Your responses (or lack of) to questions about "plumbing"; the modeling of relationships between you and your partner, family members, and friends; sharing of values; nurturance of your child's self-esteem... all this and more have formed the bulk of your youngster's sexuality education. In years to come, the sexual specifics - those issues more readily identified as "sex education" - will become increasingly complex: puberty, gender orientation, teenage sexual activity, birth control, and sexually transmitted infections. In giving your child the facts, your continued attention to the fundamentals of self-esteem, love, respect, etc. will help insure a positive - and practical - learning experience.



## Self-Esteem: A Fundamental Building Block



Second grade is a time of busy social development for children. Along with increasing concern about "what my friends think of me," there's a natural desire to further separate from mom and dad. Don't be fooled by this surge of independence. Back off enough to allow your youngster to "test his wings," *but don't back off too far*. Despite close ties to outside friends and activities, *children need to feel secure in their parents' love for them*.

While your 2nd grader may resist - even *refuse* - your hugs and kisses (especially where others can see!), s/he still appreciates the offer. So please don't automatically withdraw usual displays of affection, assuming your child no longer wants or needs them. Continue to check in with, "Hey, I'd sure love to give you a kiss. What do you say?"

Children of all ages need to feel loved and valued. When parents or guardians take time to remind them how special they are, it bolsters their self-esteem. The link between self-esteem and adolescent sexual behavior has received much attention. Healthy self-esteem increases the likelihood of healthy, more responsible choices - about sex as well as other issues. A young child's self-esteem requires conscious tending and nurturing. Parents are just right for the job.