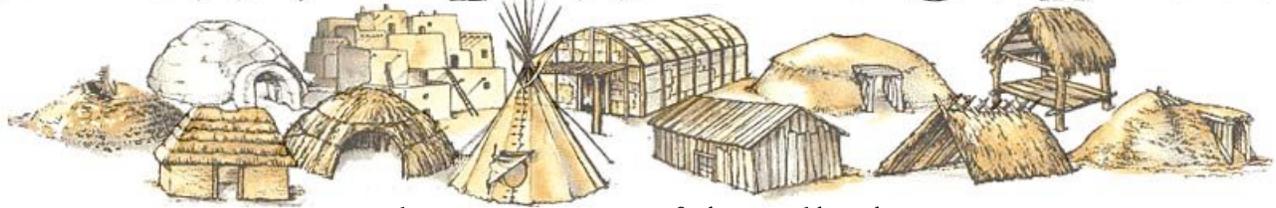


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It's Time to Talk

How was the subject of sex handled in your family when you were growing up? Was it a fairly open topic? Were your parents, aunts, uncles, or grandparents willing to talk about sexual issues in a frank and honest manner? Did they encourage you to discuss questions or concerns you might have?

If the answer is yes, consider yourself fortunate - and unusual. *Those raised in families that placed a high priority on open, honest communication about sex are truly rare, especially in Native communities where boarding schools created disconnect between the generations.*

In mainstream American society, sex education has often been of the "too little, too late" variety if taught at all. Perhaps it was assumed that "when the time comes, the kids will figure out what they need to know." Unfortunately, many Native communities have also adopted this attitude. That approach didn't work well when it was first introduced by settlers - and it certainly doesn't work *now*. ***So... how many of you want to do things differently with your children?***



Traditionally, children in Native families grew up learning about sex and sexuality in a healthy and natural context through story telling, ceremony, and honest communication in daily life. Historical trauma has taken a toll on our families; many parents and grandparents grew up in boarding schools and never learned Native parenting skills that include passing on values about reproductive health. Now is the time to heal the sacred hoop and open communication back up with the future generations

We live in a sexually explicit world. Children hear all kinds of sexual references and (mis) information at an early age. If parents were privy to the schoolyard conversations of typical 3rd graders, they might well be shocked! **Sexuality is fascinating to these kids - a subject they chatter about with significant inaccuracy.** This isn't surprising, considering ***their two main sources of information tend to be each other and the media.*** Not a comforting thought.

The issue is not "sex education: yes or no?" but "sex education: when and by whom?"

First and foremost, parents need to be the "whom." After all, ***as a parent, you are the expert when it comes to passing along family values around sexuality.*** You are the one who can best speak from the heart, offering guidance and support to the children you love. This is not to say that accurate, useful information is unavailable elsewhere. But certainly parents need to be the key providers of that education.

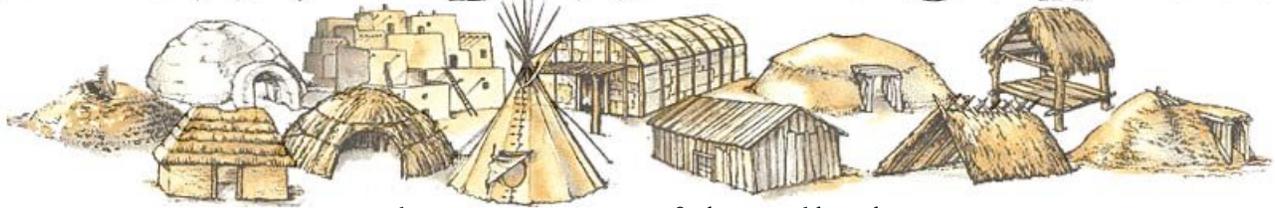
Ideally, the "when" would be from birth. Truly, this is the time to begin establishing a conscious and loving family environment designed to promote positive attitudes toward sexuality. Remember that parents communicate - in both verbal and non-verbal ways - perceptions, beliefs, and judgments about sexuality. This communication begins, often unconsciously, with the birth of a child. And it has powerful, long-term impact on that child's developing attitudes.

Children raised in families that value and promote open communication about sex are more likely to form a positive, respectful outlook toward sexuality. We know this from research, from experience and from just plain common sense. We also know that over the years, this translates into greater ability to make positive, healthy, and respectful decisions about sex.

It may be tempting to shrug all of this off with "Hey, I didn't get much sex education from my parents - and I turned out ok." But keep in mind: our world has changed dramatically since we were kids. What may have sufficed in the past is grossly inadequate now.

Keep in mind too that you needn't go it alone. There are many excellent resources to support and assist you. Check with your local Planned Parenthood, health department, Indian Health Service or physician.

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Teachable Moments: You Did What????!!!

The note from Danny's teacher left you speechless. It seems your 3rd grader and some of his buddies were caught poring over a "girlie" magazine brought to school by an older boy.

"This must be one of those 'teachable moments' I keep hearing about," you say to yourself. But at this point, you're frozen with disbelief, anger... perhaps a mixture of emotions you haven't quite sorted out yet.

This must be one of those
'teachable moments' I
keep hearing about...

Take time to sort out what you're feeling, and why.

That will help you figure out how to best respond to this incident. An "emotional inventory" will take some time - which you can buy with a simple "**Danny, I need to think about this awhile before we talk. Let's discuss it after dinner.**"

You may decide you're feeling *embarrassed* by Danny's behavior ("What must his teacher think of me? Maybe she thinks we have those kinds of magazines around our house!"); *angry* ("How could Danny look at that trash!"); *betrayed and hurt* ("I've worked at teaching Danny to be positive and respectful about sexuality. Then he turns around and does something like this!").

Now that you've identified *how* and *why* you feel as you do, **take a moment to consider why Danny might have been interested in such a magazine.** Of course, the easiest way to do this would be to *ask him*. In fact, be sure you do so. Not only will this give him a chance to explain, it will likely provide a good opening for a frank discussion about sexual issues.

But for now, consider some possibilities:

- **Danny was curious** to see what female bodies look like
- he wanted to **go along with his friends**
- **it was tempting to do something "forbidden"**
- all of the above

You remember reading somewhere that **it isn't at all uncommon for young children to sneak a look at "girlie" magazines out of curiosity.** A harsh parental response often leaves them feeling embarrassed, guilty, or ashamed of their sexual curiosity. In fact, it may further encourage curiosity as they try to discover why the big upset.

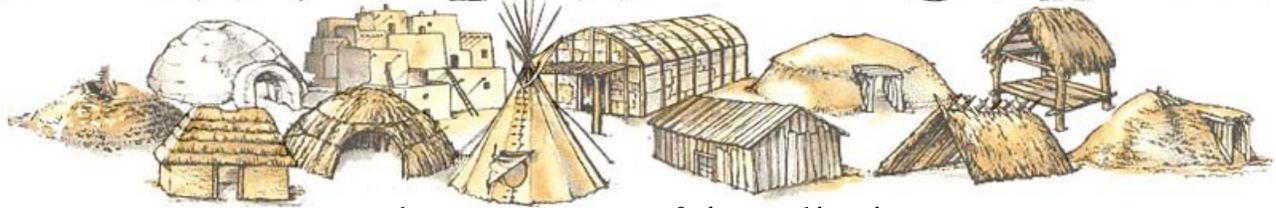
In any case, keep in mind that children this age continue their fascination with the human body. **During this pre-puberty phase, it would be helpful and reassuring for Danny to learn what bodies are all about at various stages of development.** Please don't hesitate to use one of the many educational books available on this topic. Read it with him, explaining how bodies look and function; how male and female anatomy differs; how bodies change during puberty, etc.

Along with this, **remind Danny how you feel about magazines which are sexually exploitive.** Help him appreciate that these publications can be *offensive*, and portray sexuality in a *negative light*.

You're feeling better now, pleased that you took the time to size up the situation and put it in perspective. After all, the "knee-jerk" reaction often results in messages you later regret. Such a response can be more damaging than the original offense itself.

You now have a clear sense of what you want Danny to learn from all of this, and how you want to present your message to him. "Danny, let's talk."

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Typical Questions of 3rd Graders

It is commonly believed that 3rd graders haven't the slightest interest in the subject of sex. *While it's true that many children this age hesitate to ask adults questions about sex, it's not because of a lack of interest.* On the contrary, 3rd graders are bursting with unanswered - typically unasked - questions about sexual issues. The reality is they've often learned the subject is not ok to discuss. A few disapproving looks or shocked, angry responses are all it takes to drive that message home.

In your own family, you may have worked hard to establish an environment that supports and encourages communication. But remember that your child's immersion in the outside world brings many influences into his life. Like it or not, societal attitudes toward the discussion of sexuality are still fraught with guilt, embarrassment, shame, fear, etc.

So you may find yourself needing to prod a bit more to get the conversation flowing. There's no need to force the issue - but do continue to remind your child that you're eager and willing to talk.

The following are **typical 3rd grade questions** (and possible - not absolute - responses) that are often left unshared between parent and child:

- | | |
|--|---|
| Q. How old do you have to be to have a baby? | A. As soon as a girl begins to menstruate, she is able to have a baby. Some girls begin menstruating as young as 10 or 11. Just because she is old enough to become pregnant doesn't mean she's ready to be a mother. Being a parent is a big job. It's best for girls to wait until they're grown up before they have babies. |
| Q. What about boys? When can they become fathers? | A. As soon as a boy begins producing sperm, he can cause a pregnancy. Some boys are producing sperm at age 13 or 14. But again, just because he's physically able to make a baby, doesn't mean he's ready for the responsibilities of fatherhood. |
| Q. When will my breasts grow? | A. Different people develop at different times. You're getting close to the age when your body will begin changing... including your breasts getting bigger. I was about 11 when I started developing. Maybe you'll take after me. |
| Q. Do boys have periods? | A. No. Remember that a period is the shedding of the lining that develops in a woman's uterus. |
| Q. Why is my penis so small? | A. Your penis is just the right size for your age. As you get older and start developing, your penis will get bigger. |
| Q. Brian's sister is having a baby and she's not even married. How can that be? | A. If a man and woman have sexual intercourse, whether they're married or not, the woman might get pregnant. Personally, I would want to be married before having a baby. I think that's the best way for me to raise my family. Other people may have different beliefs about that. |
| Q. Kelsey got in trouble for saying f--k. Why's it so bad? | A. It's a mean word for sexual intercourse. It's usually said in anger, or to hurt someone. |

Children can be pretty resourceful. *If they really want answers to these questions yet presume they can't approach mom and dad, they'll find other ways to satisfy their curiosity.* Some of those ways may be useless, inappropriate, or harmful.

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Winds of Change

I know what you're thinking: My child's only in 3rd grade. There's no sense in filling his/her head with talk about development, body changes during puberty, etc. **When s/he starts to develop, then we'll talk.**"

The trouble about this attitude is that **it overlooks the value of preparing children - ahead of time - for the experiences of puberty.** Certainly, parents stack the odds in favor of smoother sailing if they address these issues well in advance. This allows children the benefit of knowing what to expect, and the opportunity to hash out questions, concerns or fears they may be having about the process, *before it even begins.*

Remember that **puberty is not something that plays out overnight** - or even within the course of a few months or years. It's a process of change occurring over a period of perhaps five years, with the preliminaries beginning as early as age 8 for girls, and age 10 for boys. You can start now, discussing this issue in a positive, reassuring, and age-appropriate way.

At this stage, the bottom line for children is appreciating that *each person develops at his/her own rate* - all of which is perfectly normal for the individual. Children who have not been offered this basic information can spend years worrying that "there's something wrong with me." As a parent, you're in a great position to help your child avoid that kind of anxiety.

Consider too, the importance of helping children understand development in *both* sexes. After all, where is it written that only girls need to know about menstruation, or only boys are privileged to hear about wet dreams?! **Since males and females interact with each other throughout the course of their lifetimes, it makes perfectly good sense that they appreciate how each other's body works.**

Since the 3rd grader may be very modest and perhaps even painfully shy about his/her body, there can be some reluctance to talk about this issue. A gentle way to encourage the communication might include digging out pictures of your youngster at various ages, from birth to present day. Comment enthusiastically about "how much you've grown and developed over the last 9 years!"

Explain that there are many changes yet to come - changes which, if anticipated and understood, can be an exciting, positive experience.

Parents further facilitate the discussion by sharing what it was like for *them* - *their* feelings, thoughts, and experiences during the early years of puberty. Besides building trust and intimacy, this sharing can be a source of great relief to the child who suddenly realizes "I'm not the only one who's ever felt this way!"

Puberty can be wonderful, exciting, painful, and scary - *all at the same time!* It is the wise and thoughtful parent who assists his child - well ahead of time - in preparing for the journey.

Preparing for the journey of Puberty

Children raised with firm roots in their tribal traditions have special tools to help them journey through puberty.

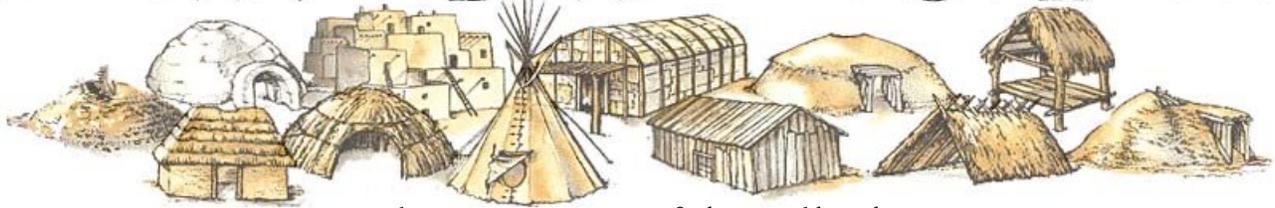
If your child hasn't had a chance to learn about the special traditions and symbols of their American Indian heritage, it is never too late to begin sharing with them. The hoop or circle is an excellent teaching tool. Some tribes focus on an open circle while others value the medicine wheel. You might want to use some simple symbols like these to help you explain your values about respect, sexuality, relationships, family, and tradition.



Some Native parents have said they've found it meaningful to have special prayers and the giving of meaningful feathers, rocks, or other gifts from nature in small ceremonies. These ceremonies can mark the transitions that a child goes through as s/he journeys through puberty.

These ideas might also help you in creating the talking space to open the door to communication with your child. Have that special time for talking about life's lessons might help build the trust between you and your child that you will need in the coming years.

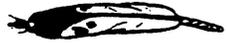
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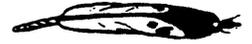
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Decision-Making: An Important Skill for Health and Safety



Remember that sexuality education involves far more than just teaching sexual specifics. In addition to information, children need to learn skills which will assist them in appreciating and handling this aspect of life.

A skill of major importance is decision-making... something one doesn't learn to be good at overnight. Your 3rd grader has made a number of decisions up to this point: who to be buddies with at school, what games s/he prefers to play, what books to select from the library, etc. *Often, the choices are impulsive and readily influenced by others who have some clout.*

As s/he matures, life issues become more complex, decisions more involved, and outside influences more intense. The wise parent will consciously assist his child in preparing for the challenge.

Young people develop a sense of competence - and confidence - when allowed to make their own decisions. Give your child the opportunity to do so. Certainly a 3rd grader can choose what to wear to school, what to buy with the birthday money grandma sent, or where the family might go for a Saturday outing.

You can assist your child in learning the art of decision-making:

- Help your child **gather information and weigh options** when making a decision. Help him/her **consider possible outcomes of each option.**
- Help your child understand that decisions have **consequences**. Play "what if..." "What if you chose not to study for your math test?" "What if you go out for gymnastics instead of basketball?" "What if a friend talked you into stealing gum from the store?"
- **Be accepting of your child's decisions** - as long as they are not harmful. Understand that s/he makes choices based on personal preference and taste. The decision may not be what you would have selected.
- **Set limits** for decision-making. If your child decides on something clearly inappropriate or dangerous, explain why you cannot accept that choice.

The ability to make good decisions is a skill that must be learned. Children who are encouraged and guided in acquiring this skill are well on their way to developing and accepting responsibility.

In the adolescent years to come, your child will be faced with a myriad of choices about which s/he will need to make decisions. One of these areas, sexual decision-making, is especially critical.

Much attention has been paid to the connection between self-esteem, decision-making ability, and adolescent sexual behavior. **Evidence supports the notion that young people who have a positive sense of themselves, and who have the skills and knowledge to make healthy choices, are more likely to do just that.** This applies to sexuality as well as other aspects of their lives.

It may be tempting to assume that "it will be a long time before my youngster has to worry about *those kinds of decisions.*" But keep in mind that media/peer influence and pressure hit hard - and early - these days. In any case, the skill of decision-making takes time to nurture and refine. It also takes practice.

Help your child practice *now* - when the issues are not so vital. Begin *now*, and your child will be well prepared when the time comes for "*those kinds of decisions.*"