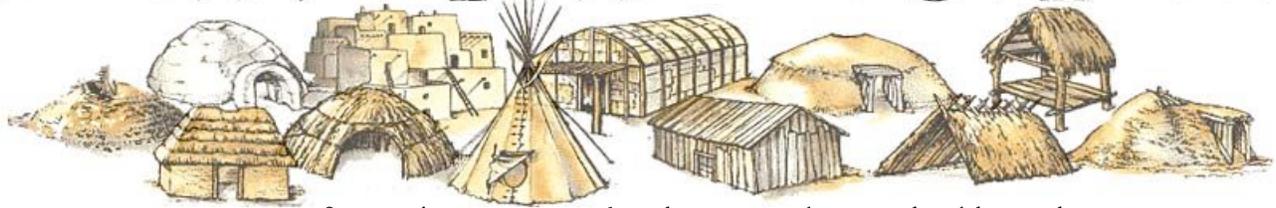


# There's No Place Like Home . . . for Sex Education



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## Talk to Me - Please!

You're not the only one who's been noticing your 4th grader's growth and development. S/he has too - often with more concern and embarrassment than pleasure. In fact, there have been quite a few experiences lately that are ... well ... just different. Like ... attraction to peers in more than just a friendship way; and classroom teasing about boyfriends and girlfriends. Things are definitely changing. *And s/he's not at all sure how s/he feels about it.*

While exciting, the "newness" is also scary. Yet **this is a time of such privacy and shyness about change that children often hold their fears of "Is this normal?" and "Am I normal?" deep within.**

Your 4th grader is conscious of the impending onset of puberty (that's right ... it won't be long now!). Whether s/he's started to develop yet or not, it's likely s/he has friends or classmates who have. In fact, *girls may begin developing as early as grade 3 or 4; boys usually a few years later.*

In any case, parents need to anticipate this, and prepare their children *in advance*. This helps ease the countless anxieties and questions which are certainly there - although often unspoken. **No matter how scary it is for you as a parent, go outside your comfort zone and talk to your child and STAY INVOLVED!** If your family has a history of open, honest communication about sexual issues, your child may likely check in with you about these anxieties and questions. If not, well ... don't worry. It's not too late. *But do begin now.* Already your child has gathered a wealth of sexual information (and misinformation) from a number of other sources: friends, TV, music, the Internet, magazines... you want to get your 2¢ worth in.

The approach to puberty offers an ideal opportunity for discussion ... but don't limit the topic to physical growth and development. Children want - and need - to hear their parents' thoughts, feelings, and values around a variety of sexual issues. They want - and need - factual information, reassurance, guidance, and support. If you find it difficult or awkward to initiate such discussions, here are a few tips to assist you:

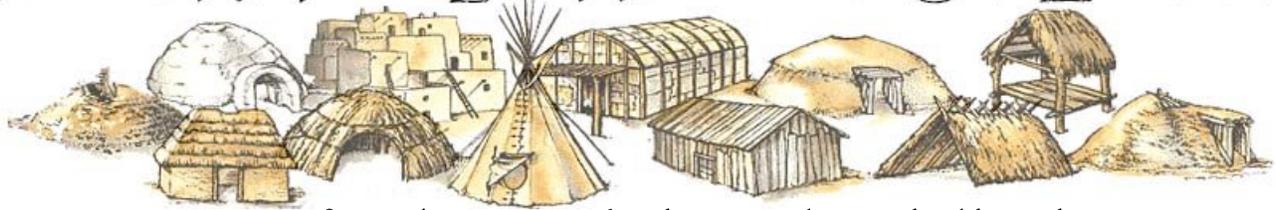
- Let your child in on how it was for you as a 4th grader. Share feelings, concerns, and experiences you remember having while growing up.
- Take advantage of the useful publications available for pre-adolescents. Leave them on the coffee table, in the family room, or somewhere your 4th grader is likely to stumble upon them.
- Use TV, movies, the Internet and other media to begin a discussion about sexuality. Let your children know how you feel about sexual messages delivered by the media. Ask about their impressions.
- Call attention to newspaper articles dealing with issues linked to sexuality: HIV/AIDS, gay marriage, infertility treatment, teen pregnancy, sexual abuse ... these are but a few topics noted daily in the headlines.

Open family communication about sex does far more than just ease the journey through the growing up years. It allows for the *sharing* of family values; the *provision* of accurate - and valuable - information; the *promotion* of a positive, respectful attitude toward sexuality; the *alleviation* of fears and anxieties; the *building* of trust, understanding, and support. If you've already established these lines of communication within your family, great! Keep up the good work! If not, begin today. You and your child have everything to gain.

In some tribes the tasks of talking with young women about women's issues is the Aunt's and Grandmother's job while the Uncle's and Grandfather's job is to talk to the young men. This is a valuable time for traditional sharing of values. It is also important though to remember that open communication about sexuality is the *family's job*, and the more everyone gets involved, the more balanced and effective it can be.

In addition to information and family values, parents offer their *personal perspectives*, as male or female. It's important and useful for dads to share this with their daughters and moms with their sons. Children will be relating to males and females throughout their lifetimes and need to understand about each other. For example, boys deserve know about female anatomy and physiology. They can learn an appreciation of the female perspective. Girls deserve an understanding and appreciation of males.

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## “What's Happening to Me?” – Your Child’s Body is Growing Fast . . .

Puberty isn't the *only* sexual topic that bears discussing with your 4th grader, but it's likely to be uppermost in *his/her* mind. Even under the best of circumstances, this time of great change for youth may occasionally be confusing and scary. Advanced preparation for puberty is likely to result in a more positive view of the process.



### General order for girls:

1. Breast budding (between ages 8 and 13, on average)
2. Hips broaden
3. Straight pubic hair
4. Growth spurt
5. Pubic hair becomes kinky
6. Menstruation or moon cycle (about 2 yrs. after start of breast development)
7. Underarm hair (in some people)

### General order for boys:

1. Growth of testes and scrotum (between 10 and 13, on average)
2. Straight pubic hair
3. Early voice change
4. First ejaculation (about 1 year after testicular growth)
5. Pubic hair becomes kinky
6. Growth spurt
7. Underarm hair (in some people)
8. Significant voice change
9. Facial hair develops (most Native men do not get facial hair)

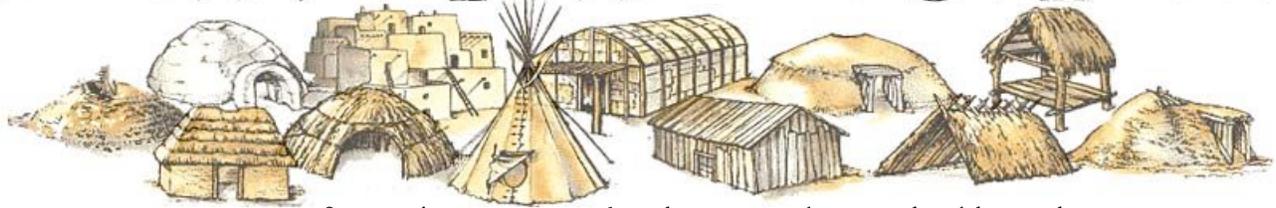
Menstruation (moon time) and first ejaculation are often seen as landmarks which signal “puberty has arrived.” In reality, *puberty is a stage of life marked by a series of events - a process that unfolds over the course of several years.* Menstruation and first ejaculation actually occur later in the process. Yet for some reason, they're seen as “highlights” - perhaps because they're such obvious signs of growing up.

At any rate, *helping your child understand the time frame of puberty can serve to alleviate classic fears* like, “Why am I growing so much faster than my friends?” “How come my friends are growing and I'm not?” “When will I get 'it'?” “What's wrong with me?” “Am I *normal*?” Children who have had little explanation of developmental differences can become obsessed with these concerns - anxiously worrying. Surely you know what that's like from your own perils of puberty. Do you recall thinking years later, “If only someone had explained what was going on with me. I could have coped much better!” As a parent, you can be that “someone” for your own child. Since we tend to assume that children know far more about their bodies than they actually do, a good rule is to *explain everything* ... even that which seems most obvious. In this way, you're likely to cover many of the unspoken concerns and questions.

At 4th grade (which is still early in the puberty game for the majority of kids), *one of the most useful pieces of information you can share with your child is a rundown of the puberty chain of events.* While it's true that children will begin developing at different times, the *sequence of events is fairly, but not absolutely, predictable.* Learning about this is far more helpful to a youngster than merely having mom and dad say, “Don't worry, honey. You'll grow.”

Of course, puberty consists of more than just physical change. *Emerging sexual feelings, emotions, relationships, stresses* all are parts of the metamorphosis. Children often feel ambivalent about growing up, and need reassurance that such feelings are perfectly normal. The journey through puberty will never be a piece of cake. But parents can do much to alleviate some of the strangeness and fear. One of the most useful ways is to *communicate.* Talk with your child now about these issues - even if you think it's a little early yet. Chances are **it's later than you think.**

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## Talking With Children About AIDS: What They Need to Know... NOW!

You never thought you would have to talk with your children in such explicit terms. But at this time, there is no vaccine against HIV infection and no cure for AIDS. The only protection you can offer your child is education. Surely you want to offer that.

You know that your 4th grader has heard a lot about AIDS - whether *you've* told him or not. There are a lot of advantages to having *you* tell him. **From the kids at school, he hears rumors, speculation. From you, he can hear the facts.** You're in a position to provide those facts in a gentle, non-threatening way... in a way that will enlighten and empower, rather than frighten him. **Along with information, you will share family values - something he won't be getting elsewhere.**

Certainly by 4th grade, children should understand that AIDS is a serious disease which is caused by a virus spread from person to person. They should be reassured that **people do not become infected through casual contact** (hugging, sharing food, sitting next to an HIV+ person); rather the virus must be introduced into a person's *bloodstream* in order to cause infection.

**During the pre-teen years (9-12), be prepared to offer your child more detailed information about HIV transmission and prevention.** At this age, children need to know that:

- ⊕ HIV can be transmitted while sharing needles with an infected person. These include needles used to inject drugs, steroids or vitamins and needles used in tattooing and body piercing. Children should be warned against "blood brother or blood sister" rituals.
- ⊕ HIV can be found in body fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal secretions and breast milk; it can **spread during unprotected vaginal, anal and oral intercourse with an infected person**; an HIV+ mother can transmit HIV to the fetus during pregnancy and/or birth. She can also transmit HIV to her baby through breastfeeding.
- ⊕ People can protect themselves by **not having sex, and not sharing needles.**
- ⊕ **Latex condoms** reduce the risk of HIV infection for people who have sexual intercourse.

Granted, it's difficult to discuss these issues. But when a child's education about AIDS is left to hearsay, s/he winds up with an incomplete, often inaccurate picture. The result is needless worry and confusion. Such a child may fear for the health and safety of his friends, his family, and himself.

Basic education can help prevent that needless worry and confusion. And when parents are the source of that basic education, they have an ideal opportunity to pass along important values to the children they love.

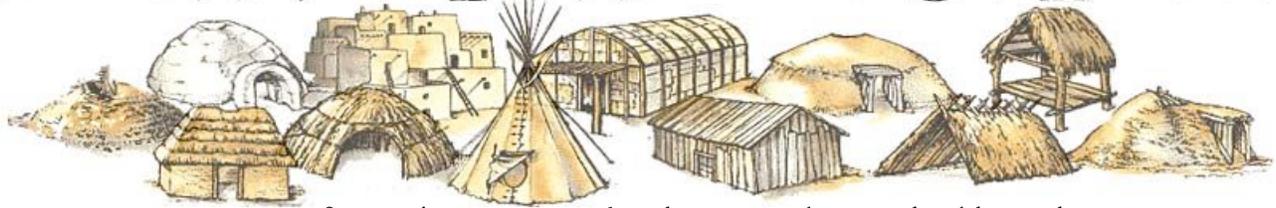
## Same-Sex Exploration: Before You Jump to Any Conclusions...

Wait a minute. You understood it when your child "played doctor" in pre-school. But this is 4th grade! What's going on here!? What's going on here is not exactly "playing doctor," but it's the 4th grader's version of checking out what bodies look like - AND - whether his looks like it should.

You see, **it's common at this age (although not widely discussed) for same-sex friends to examine each other's bodies. It's all part of a child's natural curiosity, and the need to confirm that his physical development is OK.**

This shouldn't be interpreted as "my son or daughter must be gay." Both gay and straight youth engage in same-sex exploration. It's important for both families and young people to know that automatic assumptions about sexual orientation should not be made based upon this. This is both a natural and normal part of development, so stay calm and trust that your child is simply following his/her developmental path. Also keep in mind that Native traditions honor and respect two-spirited people. No matter what happens along your child's path, he/she will need to know you can be trusted and relied on for support. Open the door of communication early; you won't be sorry.

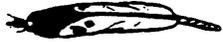
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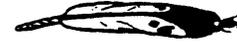
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## Dealing with Peer Pressure



It's been apparent for some time now that the influence you have over your 4th grader is waning a bit. Let's face it, *as far as your child's concerned; when it comes to certain issues, friends have more clout.* Don't give up, stay lovingly involved.

Just because you know full well that this is a sign of normal, healthy development, doesn't mean you have to *like* it. **At this age, kids are increasing their separation from the folks, testing their wings, and becoming more independent.** Scary, isn't it? The world is a far different place than when *you* were 10. Today, **4th graders experience pressures that you didn't confront until high school - even college!** Drugs, alcohol, sex, violence... elementary school students are grappling with *adult issues and decisions!*

It's not enough to tell your child, "*Don't!*" **The need to belong and to be accepted by the peer group can be powerful enough to make kids break the rules.** But it is helpful to your 4th grader when you:

- **Acknowledge** how tough it can be to go against the group.
- **Assist** him in recognizing what peer pressure looks like - the subtle and blatant forms.
- **Share** your experiences with peer pressure. Explain how you dealt with the situations. (Share your failures as well as your successes!)
- **Practice** "what if." Help her analyze consequences of various choices; brainstorm ways to respond - what could be said and done.
- **Encourage** him to come to you if he feels pressured and unsure of what to do. Offer to be his "out," his "excuse" if he needs one. Often, kids look to parents to say "No" in order to get them off the hook with their friends.
- **Reassure** her that even if she gets into trouble, you will always be there. You may be upset, and you may even yell, but you will always be there for her.

Peer pressure isn't just a childhood dilemma. It affects young and old alike. Skills you teach your child *now* will serve him throughout his life.

## The Importance of Hugs

Development occurring in middle childhood can bring anxiety and awkwardness for parents and children alike. Feeling unsure, parents may begin backing off on the physical touch and affection they freely gave before. That can be confusing to a child.

This is a time when children are preoccupied - almost *obsessed* with being normal; bodies experience furious changes in size and shape; emotions and moods can skyrocket, and then plummet - all in the course of a few hours. *This is a time when kids need that support and reassurance, that physical touch and affection which says, "You're OK."* A hug is an important way to show your child that s/he is loved.

As children mature, they initiate their own "hands off" policy. It's somewhat erratic and unpredictable. On one hand, they may show obvious distaste for parental displays of affection, flinching whenever mom and dad attempt to bestow a hug or kiss (especially if anyone else is around!). On the other hand, there are times when kids *ache* for a warm touch, but don't - or *won't* - ask. (Parents are just expected to sense this, and respond appropriately.)

At any rate, children need their parents - **BOTH** parents - to continue *offering*, but not *forcing*, physical affection. (And they will need this - whether they're 2 or 42!) Let them know you still enjoy giving (and getting) hugs and kisses - and that you respect their right to accept, to refuse - and to change their minds!

Talk with your children about your own uncertainty or discomfort. Encourage them to air their feelings. Decide together how to handle this "touchy" issue. Rather than automatically assume what the kids want and when - **ASK THEM!**