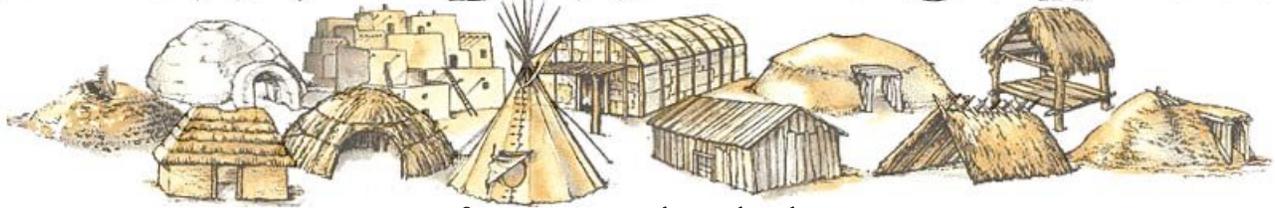


There's No Place Like Home ... for Sex Education



Grade 5

A time of transition – puberty has begun

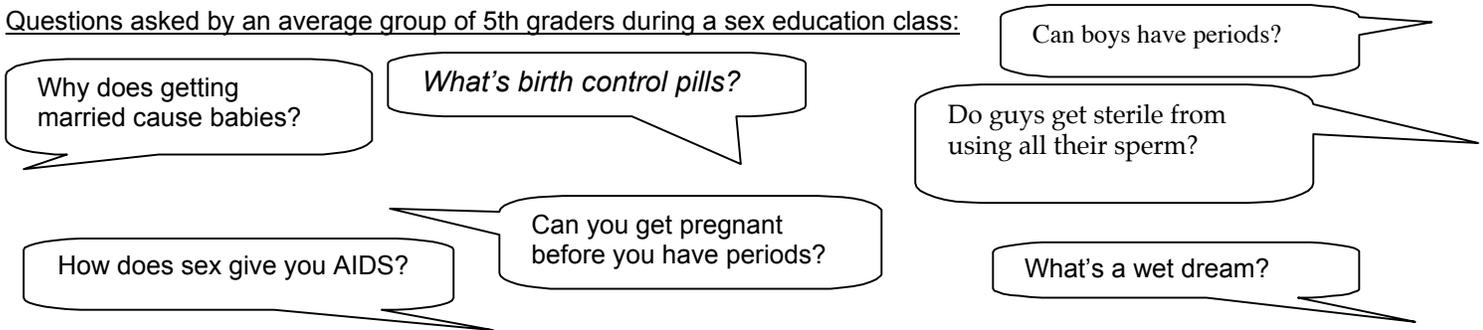
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Sexplanations: “What I Want to Know Is ...”

Talking with your 5th grader about sex and puberty is HARD, but there are some ways to make it a little easier.

- You don't need to hold a formal session; the more informal the better-you'll both be more comfortable.
- Keep talks short and voluntary.
- Tell your child that it isn't easy for you to talk about it either. “You know, sexuality has always been a hard subject for me to talk about...” This tends to make it easier for both of you and make him/her more receptive. “I do think it's important and want to answer your questions, to listen to your concerns and views. I also want to share with you my values around sexuality.”
- Stay calm, regardless of the question...some of them might shock you.

Questions asked by an average group of 5th graders during a sex education class:



Some questions may surprise you, appearing rather simplistic. You're thinking, “Surely 5th graders know *that!*” Others shock you. “I can't believe they asked *that* - in 5th grade?!”

You'd be amazed at how much 5th graders have heard about sex, and how little they really know.

It can put parents in an awkward position. On one hand, they frequently assume (incorrectly) that children understand far more than they actually do. Consequently, many overlook the sexuality basics, neglecting to pass them on to their children. On the other hand, parents may hold back on more explicit sexual issues, assuming (again incorrectly) that “5th graders don't need to know such things.”

The reality is, children are bombarded with sexual messages from friends, TV, movies, songs, the Internet. Many messages are inaccurate, perhaps irresponsible, even exploitive; a few may be factual; *typically none contain the values you want your child to learn.* Is it any wonder 10-year-olds ask sexually simplistic AND explicit questions?

The best way to ensure that your child receives accurate, values-based sexuality education is for you to be the primary provider.

This is not to suggest that sex education doesn't belong in schools. On the contrary, there are excellent school-based programs (and for some students, these programs are their *only* source of factual information). But these programs need to be viewed *in conjunction with, not in*

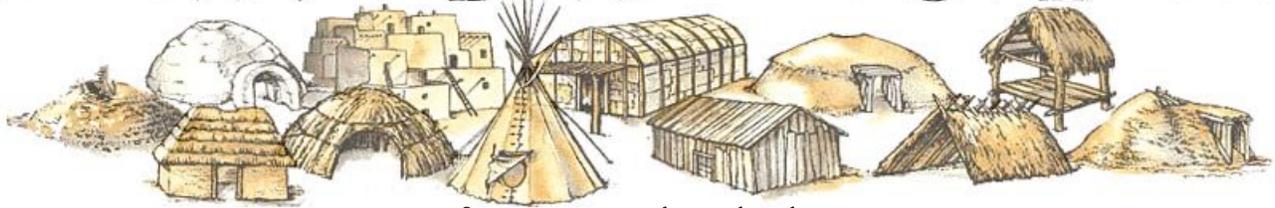
place of, parent-child communication about sex. A home/school partnership is ideal.

Don't be discouraged if you've had little open discussion about sex with your child. It's never too late to begin. Perhaps your reluctance was due to embarrassment, uncertainty, fear, or maybe you were simply unaware of the need.

Take advantage of naturally occurring “teachable moments” - a magazine article about teenage pregnancy, a news report on HIV/AIDS, a local program on sexual abuse. These are wonderful discussion starters. If your child has not begun experiencing the changes of puberty, surely some of her friends have. This is a perfect issue to address with 5th graders, since typically they have many questions and anxieties about it.

There are all kinds of opportunities and sexually related topics, if only you're open to them. And remember to address those issues you assumed were too advanced. As witnessed by the sampling of questions, children have bits and pieces of hearsay, a lot of confusion, and an abundance of curiosity about sex. A good rule is to explain what you think they want to know - and more.

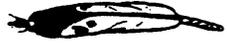
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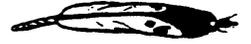
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The Secret to Communication During Puberty is Persistence



If puberty is someone's idea of a joke, nobody's laughing. To say that this can be a difficult stage for child AND parent is clearly an understatement. The most important thing during this time is to keep the communication open by being persistent. "I'm here for you and I'm willing to talk." Don't be pushy, or make a big deal of it... simply seize opportunities which allow the topic of sexuality to come up.

For children, puberty is the time of life when they typically: hate their bodies, no matter *what* the dimensions; feel weird, and can't figure out why; *"know"* they're not normal; don't want to grow up or be treated like kids; and quarrel a lot with parents who *"just don't understand!"*

For parents, puberty is the time when they typically: don't know what's gotten into their kids; feel awkward, excited, and nervous about their child's changing body; *"can't do anything right!"*; long for the days when they and their youngster could communicate - *without* yelling; panic at the pressures facing youth these days.

How can I help my child?

You can help your child on his/her journey through puberty with good preparation. With knowledge, skills, and a good attitude the journey can be rather exciting ... or at least a bit more pleasant ... OK - let's just say *tolerable*. Your 5th grader needs solid information about developmental changes that occur in *both* sexes during puberty.



Knowing this *well in advance* can lessen anxiety.

Perhaps during no other phase of life do people undergo such physical and emotional transformation. While excited at the prospect of growing up, many kids (and parents) feel, "I'm not sure I'm ready for this."

- Let your child know that the way s/he feels is common.
- Encourage him/her to talk about feelings s/he has toward growing and changing; what s/he's looking forward to, or is concerned about.
- Share *your* stories about puberty. Kids love being in on their parent's lives. It builds trust and reassures children that parents appreciate what they're going through.
- Reassure them that each person has his/her own timeclock. The body develops *when it's ready*...some begin early, others later. Even if they're not satisfied with their personal development schedules, children are relieved to hear they're normal.

If your child is embarrassed or genuinely uncomfortable discussing these issues, acknowledge this. You could say, "A lot of people are embarrassed to talk about these things. If you're feeling that way, I understand. I'm feeling a bit awkward too. Maybe we can help each other."

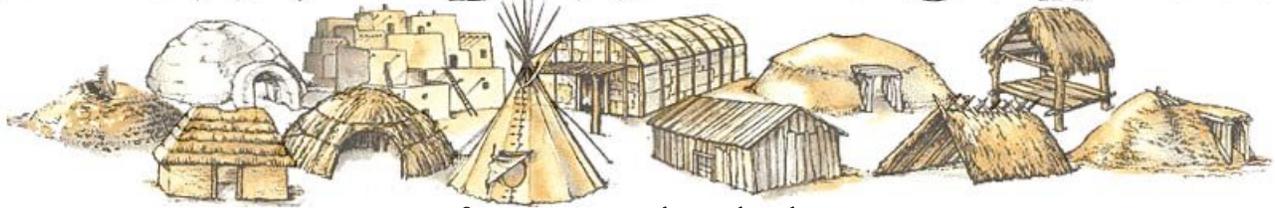
If s/he's reluctant to talk, don't force it. You might comment, "I can see this is hard for you to talk about now. Is there something I could do to help? Would you like to try again another time?"

There are many ways to share information with your child. Be creative. **Take advantage of the excellent books written specifically for youth.** Leave them around the house where your child is sure to find them. (You read them too. Remember what it's like to have puberty strike. Such a refresher can provide you with facts you've long since forgotten... or perhaps never knew!) At a later point, offer to discuss the books with your child.

Many tribes have special ceremonies to honor and celebrate puberty. If you don't already know these traditions, community elders, as well as your tribal resource center, are wonderful resources. The preparation and planning for ceremonies usually include special rituals for the youth. These activities can help ease the tensions of puberty by giving it special meaning.

Puberty consists of a series of events which unfold over the course of 4-5 years. Why not do all you can to ease the transition through those years? Your child will not be the only one who benefits!

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A Check List

It's a good time to assess exactly what your 5th grader knows (or not) about sexuality. Take inventory of what's important to understand by this age, and catch up on items that haven't yet been addressed.

By 5th grade, children should have knowledge about:

- | | |
|---|-------------------------|
| ≤ anatomy and changes during puberty for both sexes | ≤ sexual intimacy |
| ≤ reproduction and birth | ≤ your related values |
| ≤ HIV/AIDS | ≤ sex role stereotyping |
| ≤ sexual abuse, exploitation, and date rape | ≤ relationships |
| ≤ sexual orientation | ≤ decision-making |
| ≤ masturbation | |

This is by no means a complete list. It's merely a reminder of the knowledge that becomes even more critical at this age for your child. If you're looking at this list thinking, "We haven't covered *half* of this!", don't panic. But do get moving! The 11-year-old needs solid information - often on issues that parents assume are "too advanced."

Urges and Surges

The physical and emotional changes which occur in children during puberty are plainly evident to their parents. But the accompanying transformation in sexual feelings, urges, and fantasies are not so obvious - in fact, they are typically kept hidden.

Without a chance to hear that it's perfectly normal for sexual feelings and urges to intensify, and for fantasies to become more frequent during puberty, children may find themselves a bit shaken ("Is this *supposed* to happen?").

It's also during this stage that masturbation is usually rediscovered (if it had ever been forgotten), along with any guilt or anxiety which may have been previously attached to it. Rarely asked questions about whether masturbation is good/bad often plague children. *Give children reassurance that the hormonal changes of puberty can result in new and intense sexual feelings.* This is normal and all part of the wonder and excitement of growing up!



Now is a good time to share your family and tribal values about masturbation. You might want to explain that it can be a natural and healthy way for young people to deal with sexual urges and that traditionally some Native people have used it as a form of birth control. You could share with your child that it is normal to feel the sexual feelings s/he is feeling and that there are times when it may be appropriate and preferable to masturbate than to seek sexual contact with others...*if this is what you believe.* Parents may worry that saying masturbation is acceptable will encourage their children to become more sexually active. But this has not been shown to be the case.

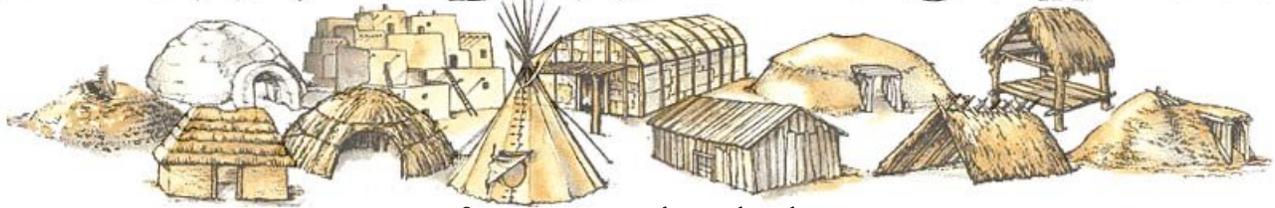
If you believe masturbation is acceptable, healthy exploration, say so! If you do not believe masturbation is acceptable, explain that in a loving way, without causing your child guilt or shame.

This is an important time to share honest information about facts and values. You are trying to help lessen the stress and anxiety of the journey through puberty, so remember to stay calm, honest, and open.

If you've not built a foundation upon which to discuss some of these emotionally charged issues, it makes it tougher ... *but not impossible.* Here are some possible icebreakers to get the conversation started:

- I remember being 11, experiencing a lot of new feelings and urges. I wasn't quite sure what to make of them. I know a lot of my 11-year-old friends felt the same way, but unfortunately, no one ever talked about it.
- When I was your age, I felt uncomfortable talking with my folks about sex, but I had lots of questions. How can I help you feel comfortable talking with me about these issues?

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Facts vs. Fears about Sexual Orientation

Around 5th grade, young people begin wondering (perhaps *worrying*) about sexual orientation: How can you tell if you're gay or lesbian? What *causes* it? Does masturbating mean you're gay? Are lesbian and gay people normal?

When you think about it, at this age, these questions are not at all surprising. Puberty is the time when children are at the height of growth, change, AND worry! **The events of puberty can arouse anxieties, uncertainty, and confusion as perhaps no other stage of life can.** It seems the overwhelming fear is that of being different from their peers.

As part of all this, concern about sexual orientation may begin to sprout. There's a lot of fuel for the fire: same-gender play is common, with friends checking each other out, partly in an effort to validate their own development; sexual fantasies may include same-gender friends; young people frequently develop crushes on same-gender teachers, coaches, etc. Add to all this, the pervasive assumptions about HIV/AIDS and the gay community, along with the common derogatory schoolyard remarks about people who are gay and lesbian.

Top it off with a lack of understanding or someone to even talk to about these things, and you've likely got a confused kid on your hands.

Whether your child has asked you about sexual orientation or not, now is a good time to address it. There are many leads to the subject, including TV shows, news reports, or a negative term overheard in reference to people who are gay or lesbian.

You can help your child by pointing out some of the common misconceptions. This is also a good time to share traditional Native American values on respect and tolerance. You might want to talk about how "Two-spirited" people were often considered to carry sacred medicine and that the Great Spirit gave them special roles in early Native American culture. Additionally, we now know:

- People do not choose their sexual orientation.
- No one can *cause* another person to be gay, lesbian or heterosexual.
- Being gay is not a sickness or mental illness.
- Being gay or lesbian is not something that can or needs to be "cured."

Encourage your child to express his feelings. Ask what he's heard from the kids at school. This may allow him to discuss some of the anxieties he has about his own sexual development. In addition to reassurance, you can offer your personal values and perspectives around sexual orientation. Be prepared to answer the question: Is it bad to be gay?

Explain that people have different opinions about sexual orientation. Then specify yours. While sharing your beliefs, be sure to emphasize that it is never OK to discriminate against someone because of sexual orientation. Point out that a word like "fag" is offensive and meant to hurt. This and other derogatory terms are used in anger or to ridicule.

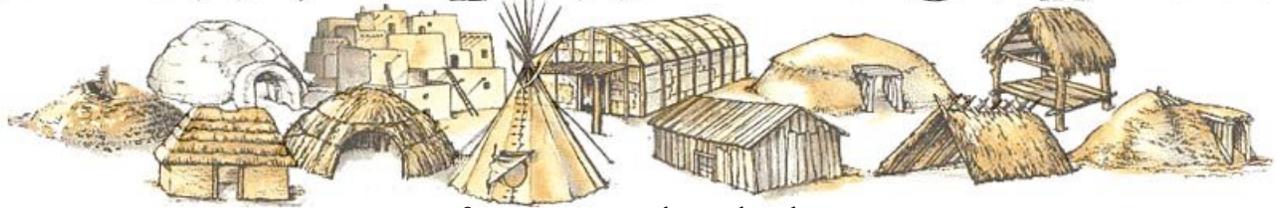
Be sure to acknowledge that gay and lesbian couples have loving relationships that are as wonderful and important to them as any other couple's relationship is to them.

Let your child know that you would love and support him, no matter what his own sexual orientation might be.

Once again, you're faced with a difficult subject that needs to be discussed - for *everyone's* sake. It's an issue that evokes a lot of emotion, judgments, values - as well as a hefty dose of misunderstanding... which is exactly why many parents choose to avoid the subject.

Please don't be one of those parents. You have a big responsibility to your child and to your culture. Take advantage of this opportunity to reinforce respect and tolerance and you will be helping to heal the sacred circle.

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Tell Me I'm OK

Your 5th grader needs to be reassured that s/he is okay and normal. Many 5th graders are anxious about the rapid changes they're experiencing, both physically and emotionally; they're worried about their bodies: **Am I too short? Too tall? Why am I so flat-chested? When will my penis grow? I hate my nose!**

They feel uncoordinated as arms and legs grow, completely out of sync with one another; their moods are erratic, for no apparent reason. Of course, it wouldn't be cool to ask anybody about this stuff, so they frequently just suffer in silence. **No wonder self-esteem can take a nosedive during puberty!**

Self-esteem is something which parents have nurtured (or not) in their child since birth. In fact, it's during the very early years that children develop a sense of their "OK-ness." For example: Even if you are angry about his behavior, by reassuring your son that you still love *him* you can promote a positive sense of self; When your fifth grader is encouraged to attempt new skills, to stretch her abilities, and then is praised for the trying, it promotes self-esteem; remind your child that differences from others (whether physical, intellectual ... whatever) make him/her the unique and special person s/he is - that builds self-esteem.

How do I nurture self-esteem?



At this stage, parents and guardians would do well to be especially aware of their children's need for encouragement and support. Young people have a difficult lesson to learn: self-esteem is not and cannot be based upon what others think of them. The bottom line is how a person feels about himself. As one grandfather told his granddaughter: "Annie, not everyone is going to like you. And that's ok. What counts is that you like yourself." That's a difficult concept for adults to accept, much less children!

As parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents, we can offer our children encouragement, understanding, trust, praise, and appreciation. We can help them feel successful, acknowledging their successes, and teaching them to learn from the failures. Taking time out to teach young people the traditions and culture of their tribe can help build their sense of self-worth. You don't have to know how to make a drum or brain tan a hide. Elders in your community or on your reservation can help you identify

activities that you and your child can learn together. The time you spend learning together will help build trust and even create a safe space for talking about values around puberty and sex. Resources for sharing your culture and values with your child are all around you. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

Along with this, we can provide complete and accurate information about growth and development about the physical, emotional, and sexual issues which are all part of puberty. *With factual background, the unknown becomes less scary, less likely to cause confusion and worry which so often threaten self-esteem.* Research tells us that the **sexual decisions and behaviors of adolescents are greatly influenced by self-esteem.** High self-esteem correlates with more positive, healthy, and responsible choices.

Young people sometimes operate under the illusion that a sexual relationship proves they are loved, worthy, etc. They may agree to or even seek out sexual activity in a misguided effort to prove their self-worth. Yet premature sexual activity can leave young people hurt, confused, guilty, scared - perhaps even pregnant or infected with a sexually transmitted infection. Needless to say, the ultimate outcome can sometimes be the further erosion of self-esteem. We owe it to young people to discuss these issues with them in depth; to share our perspective about the place of sexuality in one's life; to answer their questions; to listen to their thoughts, opinions, and concerns. Rather than assume that your 5th grader has plenty of time for such discussion, realize that children are growing up much faster these days. We must prepare them to grow up safely - informed and self-assured.