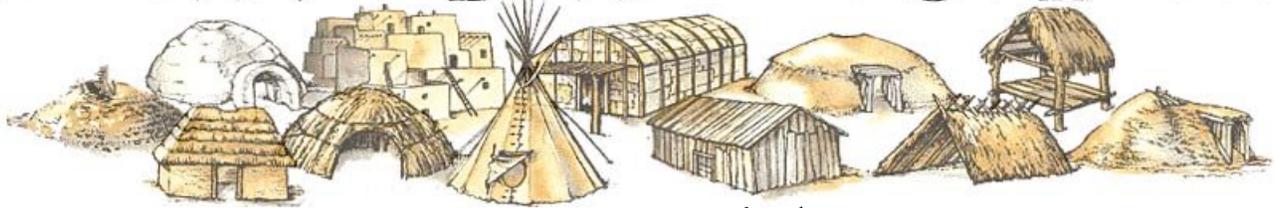


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Make Your Best Effort to Keep Communication Open and Honest

You don't get it. You pride yourself on the relative ease with which you've discussed sexual issues with your child in the past: answering questions honestly; initiating conversation; creating an environment in which sexuality is viewed as a special and positive aspect of ourselves.

What happened? Suddenly, your 6th grader has decided the topic is off limits. S/he's appalled (embarrassed, disgusted, nervous ... take your pick...) whenever the subject comes up. That's just what you've been trying to prevent... why you've worked so hard to communicate. And it's come to this? So you wonder, "What did I do wrong?"

Nothing. You have a typical 6th grader. As 6th graders go, sex is gross, embarrassing, stupid, funny, or all of the above. B.P. (Before Puberty), things were different: talking with the folks about sex wasn't a big deal; the issues were matter of fact, non-threatening. Your child was an interested bystander.

D.P. (During Puberty), sexuality becomes terribly personal! Bodies blossom, fantasies and strange new urges arise; simmering concerns about what's normal result in considerable uneasiness; many 6th graders know of someone - a friend or classmate - who is actually experimenting with sexual activity (Yes! Unfortunately some children become involved very early!)

Keep your sense of humor... and use it. This needn't be a heavy subject. Take comfort knowing that your child is moving toward A.P. (After Puberty).

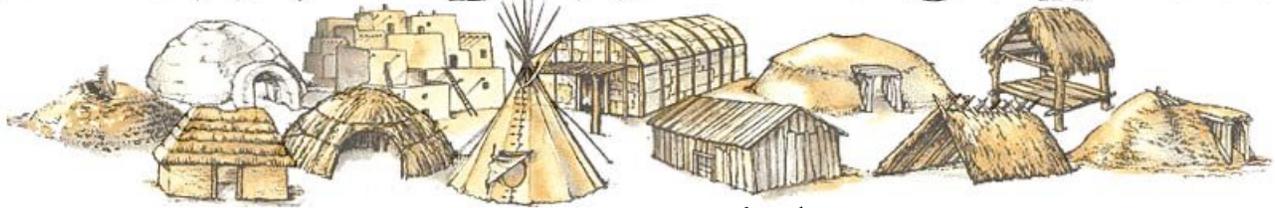
A typical 11-year-old's response to the topic of sex: *Suddenly, sexuality is hitting too close to home, it's scary...and "I'd rather not talk about it!"*. It's now especially important that parents muster patience, understanding, and support in order to teach children what they need to know:

- **Continue** broaching the subject - keep it light, don't push. Settle for a monologue if need be...at least it's putting out your message.
- **Avoid** preaching. As sex becomes more of a real issue in a child's life, it's easy for parents to fall into the lecture mode. "Do this... don't do that" is likely to fall on deaf ears - spurring even more resistance to discussion. When parents *truly listen* to their children, and encourage them to express personal views, communication is enhanced.
- **Encourage** your child to examine, clarify, and discuss his own values about sexual issues. Parents hope the family values will be accepted. Be prepared to hear that some of your child's views differ from yours. *Make it safe for him to disagree; help him know your love and support are not contingent on his acceptance of your views.*
- **Acknowledge** both your child's reactions, *and* how you feel...something like:
 - "You look uncomfortable talking about this. How can we make it easier?"
 - "When I was young, I was so confused about sex that I had a hard time asking questions. Is that how you feel?"
 - "I'm frustrated that you seem to be tuning me out. I'd like to us be able to talk about this *together.*"

Give yourself a break. Your influence on your child is a powerful one...and only one of many. Remember, you can take neither credit nor blame for the ultimate outcome. *You can only give it your best effort.*

There are a lot of resources available to help you get through these tough years of puberty. Often celebrating cultural and tribal traditions can help bring parents and children closer. Some Native parents and grandparents have shared that creating ceremonies for the young people and holding talking circles has helped ease the tension around talking about sex, puberty, development and relationships. If you don't know where to start, your local tribal resource center should have some ideas and suggestions. Many Native elders have special experiences and teachings that can help you in communicating with your child. Remember to keep an open mind and an open heart. The fact that you are trying to help your child on this journey is important. Don't be too hard on yourself, and just keep trying.

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Teen Pregnancy – It's Time for More Advanced Discussions with Your Son or Daughter

Sexual attitudes and behaviors of mainstream culture are influencing our lives as Native Americans whether or not we choose to participate. Our youth walk two paths, and we must not forget to give them the skills and knowledge they need to be healthy and safe on both those roads. The issues our people - especially our youth - are facing are difficult and complex. Sexually explicit messages permeate our lives. The impact is especially powerful on young people who lack the maturity, wisdom, and insight through which to filter the messages. We cannot pretend that these issues don't exist. Our youth need our help and cultural wisdom to to support them.

Youth who don't have adequate knowledge and understanding about sexuality are more vulnerable to the risk of premature sex, unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, sexual abuse, and exploitation.

Consider this:

- Approximately 900,000 teenage pregnancies occur each year in the U.S.; 78% are unintended.
- More than 45% of high school females and 48% of high school males have had sexual intercourse.
- Each year, 1 in 4 sexually active teens gets a sexually transmitted infection.
- The U.S. has one of the highest teenage pregnancy, birth, and abortion rates in the industrialized world.
- Risky activities like alcohol and other drug use are related to increased sexual risk taking.

Open, honest family communication about sex can help reduce the risk of a child becoming one of the statistics.

What better way to ward off the tragedies of sexual ignorance than to take preventive measures early on ... such as ... education?

Most parents recognize the importance of sexuality education, and in fact, are eager to provide it. Yet many are not prepared for the *depth* of information and skills that is important during the middle childhood years. It's time for more advanced discussion: sexual relationships, birth control and sexual protection, sexually transmitted infections, teenage pregnancy, etc.

Some parents fear that addressing such issues will condone, encourage, or promote sexual activity... put ideas into the kids' heads. Not so. Surveys of young people clearly demonstrate the ideas are already there!

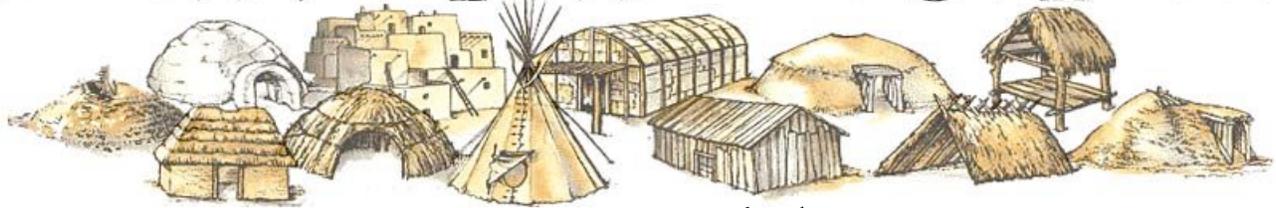
All the more reason for you to initiate discussion, provide information, and share values. In fact, some studies show that **children raised in families with open, honest communication about sexual issues are more likely to delay first intercourse and, if they do become involved in a sexual relationship, they are more likely to protect themselves.**

BASIC RULES OF SEXUALITY EDUCATION:

1. **Teach them what you think they need to know... and more. Remember that you are not only providing this education for today, but for their future as well.**
2. **The best time to talk is *now*.**

For the majority of 12-year-olds, these more advanced sexual issues can still be addressed at a fairly non-threatening, non-emotional level, since most young people this age are not yet personally involved. This is not likely to be the case a few years down the road. And once the issues become more pertinent in their lives, the discussion can become more challenging.

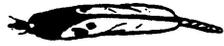
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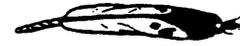
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Its Time to Talk about Relationships



You're likely to have a few ideas about when your child will be old enough for a boyfriend/girlfriend. Your child is likely to have some ideas about that too - perhaps vastly different from yours.

As parents and concerned adults, we know that kids are pressured to grow up too fast these days. We can do something to help them deal more effectively with the situation. Being there for them and listening to what they are feeling and going through helps ease the pressure.

No one is suggesting that children be encouraged into social situations prematurely. But realize that elementary school children, some as early as 4th or 5th grade, play with the concept of relationships ... boyfriend/girlfriend, etc... some more seriously than others. And be sensitive too that these interests and attractions may not all be toward the other gender.

There's the usual scribbling of hearts and initials on notebooks, phone calls and passing love notes and text messages. Unfortunately, some 6th graders (more typically 6th grade girls with older boys) get more involved in various levels of sexual experimentation ... a rather sobering thought. **It isn't too early to talk about feelings (and pressures) that often accompany interest in romantic relationships.** This is another example of addressing an issue *before* (hopefully) it *becomes* an issue! It's a chance to talk about friendship and about relating to both the other and same gender comfortably, respectfully. You can help prepare your youngster for the fun and excitement of such relationships, as well as for the frustrations, uncertainty, and disappointments that sometimes result.

Establishing supportive and loving relationships is not something people automatically know how to do.

There are skills involved - skills which can be taught and nurtured throughout childhood. But young people are less likely to look to their parents for help with these skills if they fear being teased, not taken seriously, or met with "You're too young to be interested in boys/girls." Talking circles with Native American young people revealed that these are some of the reasons they often didn't talk to their parents about relationships. If it's hard or awkward to have these conversations with your child, acknowledge that. See if you can figure out together how to make it more comfortable for both of you.

The importance of talking with your child about social relationships - ahead of time - cannot be overemphasized. Just as different children experience vastly different rates of physical development, so too with social development. This can result in worry... embarrassment... pressure... and confusion...

"All my friends talk about boys constantly, but I'm just not interested. What's wrong with me?"

"I'm a girl, and I like other girls!"

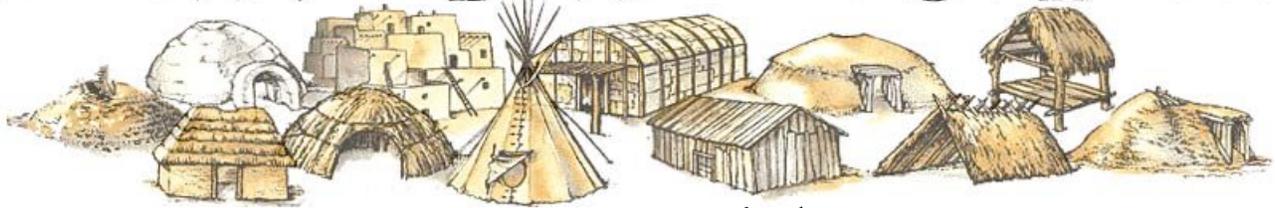
"I've got to have a girlfriend/boyfriend because everybody in my class does."

"My folks tease me whenever girls call the house. I hate it!"

Concerns about being popular, dressing right, looking good, fitting in - these are major issues for 6th graders! By talking about this, parents give children a chance to vent their feelings. It may take a bit of encouragement. After all, many children (and parents) are reluctant to talk about such personal things.

Kids need help negotiating the complexities of relating to others. Without it, they may stumble through... some with more difficulty than others. Just by being there for them and listening you can make a big difference. Be sure to remind them that they are developing at the rate that is right for them. Sharing one of your own growing-up experiences with them can be reassuring as well.

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The Media ... The Message

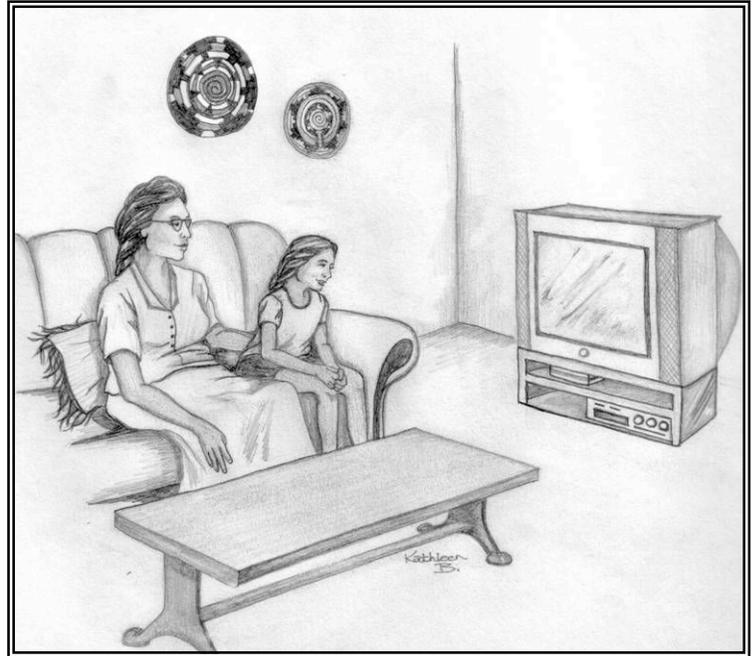
- By age 18, the average student has spent 11,000 hours in school, compared to over 15,000 hours watching TV.
- Young people cite the media as one of their major sources of messages about sex.
- A 2005 report on teens and technology indicates that 87% of US youth ages 12-17 use the Internet, exposing them to wonderful education sites, as well as highly questionable ones.

Sexually explicit messages permeate our lives. What's a parent to do? A good first step is *awareness* - recognizing the frequency and impact of these messages.

It also makes sense to monitor DVDs, T.V., radio and web sites our children tune into, realizing ***we can never completely isolate them from questionable or offensive messages.*** Despite house rules and guidelines, children are often exposed to inappropriate media without our knowledge or consent.

Help your child develop a filter through which to sort and interpret the messages. Teach him to be a discerning viewer, to *identify* and *evaluate* content. Assist him in *recognizing exploitive, irresponsible, and unrealistic sexual messages.* A good way to do this is to watch movies and TV. surf the 'Net, etc., with your child, and then have a discussion about it.

Encourage your child to express his opinions (for example: "What do you think about the way women were portrayed in that movie?" "Why do you suppose advertisers show sexy people to sell their products? What message does that send?" "What do you think about the teenager in that film having a baby?") Share *your* thoughts and values too. We needn't analyze all media to death... just be alert to the messages. It's a good way to put a powerful influence into perspective.



Peer Power

It's important to talk with 6th graders about sexual (mis)information and peer pressure. A good way to broach the subject is to share a bit of your own past (which kids love!). "I remember the wild ideas we heard about sex when I was young. Like: you can't get pregnant the first time you have sex; or having sex proves you're grown up. What kinds of things have you heard?"

Impress on your child that when it comes to sexuality, accurate sources are important. Suggest some options: parents, teachers, school nurses, counselors, etc. Realizing they have several alternatives, young people may be less inclined to accept their peers as "sexperts."

Make it safe for your child to discuss sexuality with you.

- **Listen** to his concerns, questions, etc., knowing that interest in the subject doesn't mean he's sexually active or considering it.
- **Respect** his right to express views which may differ from yours.
- **Present** facts along with your values, *being careful to differentiate between the two.*
- **Trust** his ability to make good decisions, if given information, taught the skills, and provided support.

Peer influence isn't confined to sex, OR youth. We deal with it at some level throughout our lives. Your child will benefit from learning how to handle it now.