

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



Grade 7

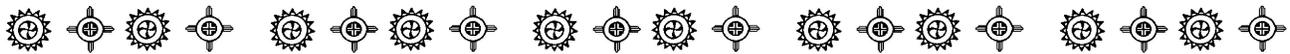
Emotional roller coasters, boyfriends/girlfriends, lots of worries

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## What Do I Say About ...

When it comes to discussing sexual values with your children, **say what you believe.** It's that simple (or that difficult).

It is up to you to share your values and beliefs. Even if it seems that your sixth grader is closing you out, hang in there and keep trying. Resources for sharing your culture are all around you. Community and tribal elders are wonderful sources of advice and wisdom. The secret is to never give up trying to communicate with your child.



### Sexual feelings. Having sex. Sexual orientation.

These are a few of the issues milling about the minds of 6th graders. When given the opportunity in an atmosphere of trust and safety, many young people ask lots of questions about these and other sexual topics. They're anxious to hear the facts... AND what *you* think. Maybe you're not sure *what* to say or *how* to say it. Do you avoid the subject altogether, hoping the kids won't bring it up... which they won't if they get the sense you would rather not talk about it. Don't be scared to talk to you kids. They want and need to hear from you about these issues.

But you might be thinking:

**"I don't want to encourage her."** It's a common fear, but listen: your youngster needs no encouragement. She's getting *plenty* from peers, from the media... maybe it's time she heard from *you*.

**"I don't want to preach."** Good. Your children don't want that either. But expressing your personal beliefs about an issue isn't the same as trying to force someone else to accept them. It's all in the delivery. For example, a parent might say, "I believe teens are too young to have sex. There are good reasons to wait (such as: there's a lot of responsibility and emotional implications which most teens are not ready to accept; they may feel pressured into sex, and wind up feeling regretful; there could be risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections)."

**"I don't want my son to think that as long as teens use birth control, it's ok for them to have sex."** Fine. Don't tell him that. Informing youth about birth control is not an open invitation for them to have sex. Parents may fear they are giving a double or contradictory message ("Don't do it... but if you do, use a condom."). Such is not the case if information AND values are shared. The result is a loving, helpful message. For example: "I don't think teenagers should have sex. And, I realize that many do. It's important that they protect themselves from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections whenever they do decide to have sex."

Could it be that some parents avoid discussing controversial sexual issues for fear their children may not accept their beliefs? "Then what would I do? How would I handle *that*?" It's a tough one, all right... facing the fact that ultimately our children form their own opinions and develop their own value systems – which may or may not be in line with ours.

**It's also true that most children eventually adopt many of the family and cultural values. Nonetheless, they need the opportunity to examine, question, challenge. Would you rather your child test out ideas and views about sexuality in an arena of open communication with loving parents or guardians - or through experimentation?**

Encourage the discussion of sexual issues, remembering to *listen to your child's views* as well as *state your own*. Take on the controversy. **Say what you believe, taking care to present the facts as well as what you value... while not confusing the two.**

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## The Wonder Years . . . Putting Your Ideas into Their Heads!

Remember what the middle school years were like? An emotional roller coaster: hormone madness and changing bodies; being self-conscious; novel interest in the same or other sex - which is exciting, awkward, confusing - all at the same time; a simultaneous *craving for and fear of* new freedom... independence from mom and dad.

Middle school: the wonder years.

### Young people wonder, “Will I ever be normal?” Parents wonder, “Will this ever end?”

Clearly, life's a challenge in middle school... for all involved. It's a time when parent/child conversations of any sort can be tough; conversations about sexual issues...seemingly *impossible!*

For parents, there's a temptation to shy away from the subject. Old anxieties come back to haunt us. Concerns like: “Maybe all this discussion with children about sex isn't such a good thing. We don't want to *encourage* them... you know, put *ideas* into their heads.” Or: “Is it a *mistake* to talk about this so openly with kids? Why not let them stay innocent as long as they can? There's plenty of time for them to learn about all this adult stuff.”

Sound familiar? Rest assured the *very least* of your worries are the “ideas” you might put into your child's head. The reality is that your 7th grader is exposed to a daily barrage of sexual messages... from peers and the media. The messages are frequently inaccurate, irresponsible, and even exploitive!

As parents, **you're in an ideal position to clean up sexual “myth-information.”** The “ideas” you'll be putting into your child's head are about your family and cultural values around sexuality; they're about accurate information; respectful, positive attitudes toward sexuality; and about love, trust and support.

But what about the fear that knowledge equals activity - that giving kids information on all this adult stuff might encourage sexual experimentation? No worries.

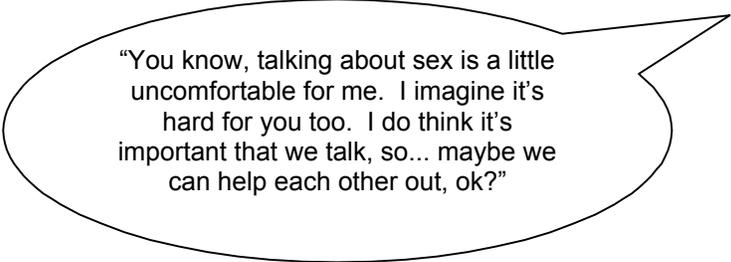
Research shows that teens are far more likely to learn by doing when they have been kept ignorant (innocent?); have been given little or no opportunity to talk openly with parents or other trusted adults about sexual issues; and when their sex “education” has been left to peers and the media.

Surely, as a parent or guardian you do not want to leave your child's sexual learning to chance. The results of “trial and error” sexuality education are disheartening at best. Often they are devastating: premature sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections. These are just a few of the consequences of sexual ignorance.

So, put those old anxieties back where they belong - and remember what you already know: your children need and deserve to hear from you about all the issues of importance to their lives... including sexuality.

During the wonder years, kids *and* parents have loads of things they're concerned and confused about,. Making it safe for the family to talk about sexuality lightens the load. Difficult? Uncomfortable? Awkward? Maybe... and well worth the effort.

Stuck for an icebreaker? Try something heartfelt and honest.



“You know, talking about sex is a little uncomfortable for me. I imagine it's hard for you too. I do think it's important that we talk, so... maybe we can help each other out, ok?”

Broach the subject by using “teachable moments” like a news story on HIV or teen pregnancy. Watch TV together and discuss the sexual messages you notice.

**Take any and all opportunities you can to put your ideas into your child's head!**

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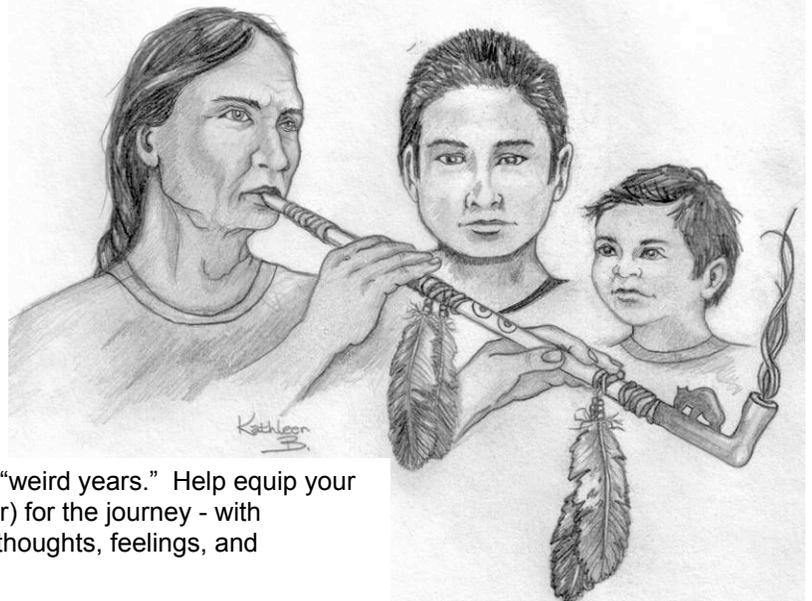
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## Puberty 101

Puberty. Almost sounds like a disease. For those experiencing it, it often feels like one. Of course, much of that has to do with the incredible physical changes that occur: hormones surging, bodies transforming (usually into sizes and shapes that are NEVER right!).

And let's not overlook (as if we could) the emotional upheaval that accompanies puberty: intense feelings of excitement, anxiety, happiness, anger, sorrow, delight... perhaps all within a matter of hours! Imagine experiencing such major change without having a clue that it's all perfectly normal!

You can ease your child's passage through the puberty "weird years." Help equip your son/daughter (or niece/nephew/grandson/granddaughter) for the journey - with information, support, and plenty of opportunity to share thoughts, feelings, and questions.



Although they're dying for answers as well as reassurance, many 7th graders are reluctant to approach mom and dad with their concerns. Don't mistake their silence as a sign that they know it all or don't want to talk about it. Sometimes their confusion is so great, they don't even know what to ask or how to begin! Add to that the awkwardness that often goes along with conversations related to sexuality... and you can appreciate their dilemma. So, initiate the conversation.

Just in case your memories of puberty have mellowed over time, here are some of the more pressing concerns:

- ⊕ I'm the tallest (shortest, skinniest, fattest) kid in the class. I hate it!
- ⊕ Will my penis ever grow?
- ⊕ Why am I so flat chested?
- ⊕ I'm the only girl I know who hasn't gotten 'it' (my period).
- ⊕ **AM I NORMAL?**

### 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)

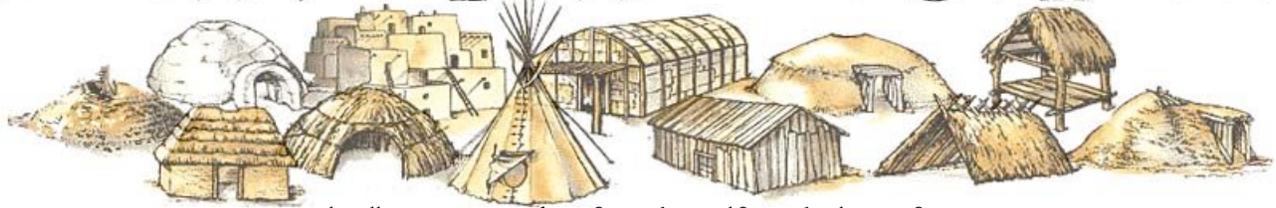
Parents can spare their children anxiety by sharing the details of how this puberty business works. People grow and change at their own rate, whether they like it or not. AND, they begin the process of sexual development at the time that's right for them. Some start early, some late... either way, it's perfectly normal.

Offer your 7th grader a rundown of physical changes to expect during puberty. The entire process takes place over 4-5 years. It's marked by a series of events which occur in a fairly predictable sequence, although some young people follow a slightly different sequence - and that's normal too! Explaining this to your child is far more useful than simply saying, "Don't

worry. Your body knows exactly what it's doing."

When children can gauge their own development against this kind of roadmap, they feel more assured that they're on track. Remember too, that puberty is more than just physical change. Emerging sexual feelings, emotions, relationships, stresses... these are all part of the journey, and can be especially difficult to discuss.

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## The Dating Game

Middle schools are filled with many who worry, "What's wrong with me!?" if they're not interested in the other gender. Media and peer pressure to be involved in early relationships heighten the anxiety.

*"I'm just not interested in having a girlfriend, but that's all my friends talk about! Am I weird or something?"*

"I wish I was popular like Karen. All the boys like her." Disappointment, bruised self-esteem, secret fears and hurts may rarely be expressed to anyone - especially parents.

Many 7th graders sample boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. Help your child understand that people develop social readiness at their own rate.

Acknowledge it's often confusing to be surrounded by friends who vary greatly on the readiness scale. Even if your child hasn't expressed concerns about this, bring it up... just to be sure. Break the ice with your own recollections of 7th grade:

"I remember 7th grade. It seemed like everyone was paired up or had a crush on someone. Me? I could have cared less at the time, but I didn't dare admit it. My friends would never let me live it down! But you know, I bet a lot of them secretly felt the same way I did."

"I wonder about young people who are attracted to their same gender friends. With all the pressure to have a boyfriend or girlfriend, they must feel pretty isolated and afraid to talk about their feelings."

This kind of conversation is a nice acknowledgement that not all people have romantic feelings for or relationships with someone of the other gender. It opens the door for your child to discuss this with you if they are questioning their own sexuality. By initiating discussions about these issues, you can help relieve the social pressures your children may be experiencing. Explore feelings and situations that can arise when romantic interests begin to emerge.

**Even if your child isn't ready (or willing) to talk freely about this, you won't be wasting your time. The message will still be heard: "If you find you're feeling confused about this, please know that I'm here for you. I'll listen, try to understand, and who knows? Maybe I can help."**

## A Little Help from Friends...

The depth of sexuality education required by 7th graders may be more than parents realize. One mother commented, "I didn't know half that stuff 'til I was out of college!" Her husband added, "A lot of it I still don't know!"

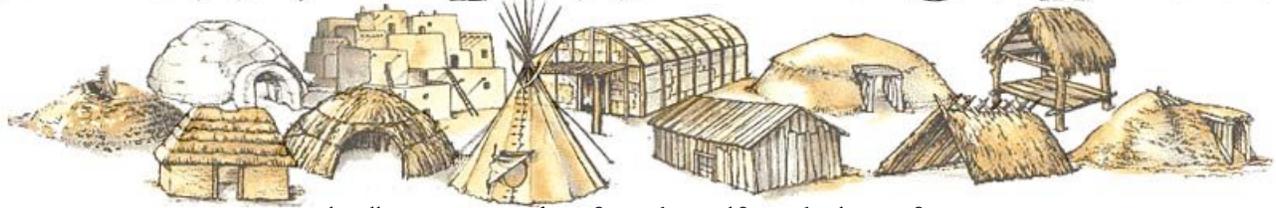
It's true. Today's adolescents confront sophisticated, complex issues. In trying to provide information and guidance parents often recognize deficiencies in their own sexual knowledge. It's easy to feel overwhelmed about what to say and when to begin...

If you value family communication about sex, if you recognize that complicated issues must be addressed, and if you are committed to working through any discomfort or resistance you and/or your child may feel about discussing these issues, you're well on the way.

Specifics and practical "how to's" of family sex education can be acquired as you go along. There are many resources to assist you.

- Planned Parenthood is an excellent source for speakers, books and pamphlets.
- Community schools and colleges may offer parenting classes that address sexuality issues.
- Physicians, family counselors, tribal elders and members of the clergy often have valuable insights on sex education.
- Tribal health centers and Indian Health Service may be able to help you learn about these issues in the context of your tribal and cultural traditions and needs.

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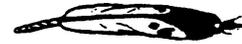
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## Sexual Knowledge Supports Sexual Health



“How do you make a baby?” Remember the first time your little one posed THE QUESTION? You recall with amusement the delight with which s/he repeated (and *repeated*) the question - for all the people in the grocery store to hear! S/he delivered the line with such volume, such clarity... *and* determination!

“How do you make a baby?” A legitimate question, yet one that so frequently catches parents off guard and unprepared. Why? Maybe we just never expected the issue to crop up at such an early age. That little one is now a 7th grader... perhaps with parents who are still caught off guard and unprepared when it comes to sexuality and youth.

It's easy to understand how this can happen. After all, sexual involvement, unintended pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, birth control... surely we would never expect these issues to crop up at such an early age. Yet they are the very issues parents need to address, especially with their 13- and 14-year-olds.

Comparatively speaking, “How do you make a baby?” is a piece of cake. Now the questions are far more intense. Given the social/ sexual pressures faced by adolescents today, clear, open and explicit family communication is essential.

Please know that family discussions about sex need not be conducted with a sense of urgency or doom. Parents are encouraged to address issues such as sexual intercourse, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections early - before they become immediate issues, and thus a possible source of controversy between parent and child.

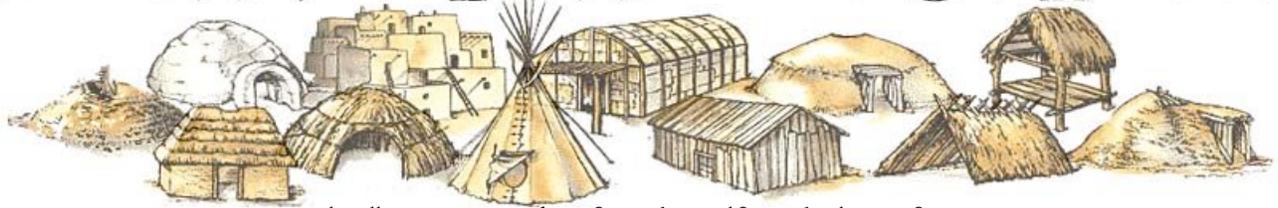
Most 7th graders are capable of understanding the broader implications of sexual relationships. Not yet deeply involved, they're better able to have calm, rational discussions with you about why some teens might choose to have sexual intercourse - including the responsibilities involved and possible consequences.

Granted, the conversation may feel a bit awkward or uncomfortable at first, especially if the family has little history of open sexual discussion. That's ok. The process may take time. Be patient and gentle - with your child and yourself.

This is a perfect opportunity for parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and other guardians to share personal values and attitudes around sexuality, in a non-threatening, non-judgmental manner. It's also a good time to clean up any misinformation about the mechanics of reproduction... as well as other sexual issues.

Despite all that young people have heard about sexuality - from family, peers and the media, it's amazing how little they really know or understand. And, it's surprising how much they need to know... at such an early age.

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## Have You Hugged Your Kid Today?

Puberty is truly an awkward time for mom and dad. Watching sons and daughters mature sexually is both delightful and disconcerting as parents struggle to relate to their new "growing up person." Ambivalence toward your child's blossoming sexuality is perfectly normal.

Uncertainty can be especially great for the other gender parent who may misinterpret puberty as a signal to "back off" physically. Vague questions can arise about "appropriate" touch, particularly between fathers and daughters.

Whatever the reason, hugs, kisses, and physical touch so freely shared before may now become awkward and strained.

It's painful and confusing to a child experiencing the usual insecurities of puberty. Unexplained withdrawal of affection is especially troubling. The result can be loneliness, confusion and lack of connection, for both parents and children.

When struggling with questions of physical touch and affection, parents might consider this: Puberty is a time when young people desperately want to feel normal, accepted, and loved. It's a time when kids need support, reassurance, and appropriate physical contact which says "You're OK."

The need is there, and often intense. Yet a 7th grader rarely admits, "I'd sure love a hug right now." To confuse you even more, s/he may outwardly resist your offers of affection. Respect that, certainly - and, recognize it's still important to offer.

It's truly a dilemma: parents are expected to have a magical sixth sense about their children's needs and feelings (despite the fact that they are often masked by contradictory behaviors)!

Puberty is indeed a difficult time ... made even more difficult by miscommunication, and reluctance to acknowledge and talk about the fears. Why not share with your child your uncertainty?

One father expressed it to his 13-year-old daughter this way: "Sara, I often find myself wanting to scoop you up and hug and kiss you just like when you were a little girl. I really miss that. And I respect that you're not a little girl anymore. I'm not sure whether you feel comfortable with all that physical affection, so I find myself being cautious about touching you. Can I count on you to let me know what's OK and what isn't?"

Of course, remind your child, "No one - including family members - has the right to touch or approach you in ways that make you uncomfortable. Listen to your feelings, and tell that person to stop. Tell an adult you trust."

This whole "touchy" business is very personal - and different from family to family. Some of us were raised on a diet of hugs, kisses, snuggling... and we feel more or less comfortable with that. For others, overt displays of affection are, and perhaps always were, uncomfortable. There's no right or wrong way to feel about this issue. The point is, whether it's a hug, kiss, squeeze of the shoulder - whatever - giving and receiving appropriate physical touch that

expresses warmth and caring is important to all of us. Our need for that doesn't change - even with puberty. If anything, perhaps the need becomes greater. So, rather than presume to know your child's feelings or how s/he wants you to act around this issue....ASK!



### On Listening ...

In talking circles held with Native American seventh and eighth graders, many young people said that they were afraid to talk to their parents about sex because as one young man said it, "If you talk about sex they assume you are doing it."

When your child brings up something that *could* be a sensitive subject, rather than jump to conclusions or fall into the lecture mode, listen with interest and with an open mind. This could be your chance to clear up misinformation and build trust for harder topics down the road.