

Sexuality and relationships



This chapter provides information on sexuality, being sexually healthy, enhancing relationships with our partners and our children, and improving communication skills.

1. Sexuality



Session objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Explain the difference between sexuality and sex
- List the different parts of sexuality
- Describe what it means to be sexually healthy.



Session guide

1. **Ask:** What first comes to your mind when you hear the word sexuality? Allow participants to discuss.
2. **Explain** that sexuality is more than sexual intercourse and sexual feelings. Sexuality exists throughout a person's life and is the total expression of who we are as human beings, male or female. It is an important part of who a person is and it is always changing as we grow and develop. It is a part of us from birth to death. Sexuality can be complicated to understand. Sexuality includes our thoughts and feelings about sex, feeling attractive, being in love, religious and cultural views on sexual activity, feelings about our bodies, sexual fantasies, being attracted to someone, kissing, touching, how we define what is male or female, how we love, and being physically and emotionally close to another person. Just like there are many parts that make up our personality, there are many parts that make up sexuality. Our culture, traditional beliefs, and gender roles play an important part in defining what we consider normal sexual feelings and behaviour for men and women.
3. **Ask:** What first comes to when you hear the word sex?
4. **Explain** that sex is a word used to describe whether a person is male or female, but sex is also used to talk about sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse is when a penis goes into the vagina. Other sexual activities are oral sex, when a person touches their partner's genitals with their mouth, and anal sex, when a penis goes into the anus. All of these sexual activities can put people at risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Sexual intercourse puts a woman at risk for pregnancy. Sex is both emotional and physical. In addition to physical risks, there are emotional risks. Sex is attached to many emotions, and after sex people can feel disappointed. Sex is one part of sexuality. Emphasize that sexual intercourse is an activity done by the body, whereas sexuality is in the mind and is about the whole person.
5. **Ask:** What are other parts of our sexuality? Allow participants to discuss. [Answers: body image, gender roles, relationships, intimacy, love, attraction, sexual arousal, social roles, and sex (either male or female).]
6. **Explain** that sex and sexuality are often thought to mean sexual intercourse and other sexual activities. However, sex is whether a person is male or female. Sex is one part of sexuality. Sexuality includes thinking of oneself as sexual, feeling attractive, or communicating in a sexy way. Our sexuality influences how we behave. Our culture, traditional beliefs, and gender roles play an important part in defining what we consider normal sexual feelings and behaviour for men and women.

For example, some cultural traditions recognize that women have sexual desires and urges whereas other cultures do not. In some cultures it is very important for girls to be virgins when they get married, whereas men are expected to be sexually active by the time they are married.

7. **Explain** that there are many parts that make up our sexuality. Each of these parts make a person who he or she is. Divide participants into eight groups and assign one of the following words to each group. Ask each group to discuss what they understand their word to mean and how it relates to sexuality.
 - Body image
 - Gender roles
 - Relationships
 - Intimacy
 - Love and affection
 - Sexual arousal
 - Social roles
 - Genitals
8. After five minutes, **bring** the groups back together and facilitate a discussion. Ask a representative from each group to share what they discussed about their word. Allow other learners to add additional information.
9. **Facilitate** a discussion with the following questions:
 - Are there any parts that they did not think of as being “sexual” before?
 - Which of the parts feel most familiar? Why?
 - Which part is the most important?
 - How do these different parts influence our lives? Our relationships?
10. **Explain** that it is normal to have many different feelings about sexuality, including fear, frustration, uncertainty, embarrassment, confusion, shame, guilt, curiosity, satisfaction, or pride.
11. **Ask:** What does it mean to be sexually healthy? Allow participants to discuss.
12. **Explain** that there are things we can do to be sexually healthy. We can learn as much as possible about sex and reproduction. Most importantly, we can take the time to think about choices related to sexual activity. When we decide to have sexual intercourse, we can remain faithful to one partner, as well as protect ourselves from pregnancy and infections. Before acting on sexual feelings, it can help to think about what could happen if you do something. We can ask ourselves:
 - Will I or anyone else be put at risk for unwanted pregnancy, HIV, or other sexually transmitted infections (STI)?
 - Will acting on my sexual feelings cause any other problems, such as misunderstandings or miscommunication in our relationship?
 - Will it make me or my partner feel uncomfortable?
 - Will anyone’s feelings get hurt?
13. **Explain** being sexually healthy means taking the time to think about these things before acting on sexual feelings. Being sexually healthy also includes our emotional health. Sex is attached to many emotions. Sometimes you might want to have sex to feel closer, but you can end up feeling disappointed. Sex should be between two people who respect and care for each other. Sex is an emotional act. It should feel good to both people. Sex should not be used as a reward or to get something from someone. Sex should be agreed on by both people. If one person says no or stop, then it should stop. No one should be forced to have sex.

14. **Facilitate** a discussion using the following questions:

- How does our sexuality affect our relationships?
- How does our sexuality affect our lives?
- What can we do to be more sexually healthy?
- How can we talk with our partners about our sexuality?



Main messages

- Sexuality is more than sexual intercourse and sexual feelings. Sexuality includes our thoughts and feelings about sex, including feeling attractive, being in love, religious and cultural views on sexual activity, feelings about our bodies, sexual fantasies, how we define what is male or female, and being physically and emotionally close to another person.
- Culture, tradition, and gender roles define what is considered normal sexual feelings and behaviour for men and women.
- Being sexually healthy means thinking about the potential risks to our physical and emotional health before acting on sexual feelings.

2. Good communication



Session objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- List qualities of good communication.
- Explain the importance of good communication in relationships.
- Use effective communication tips to become better communicators.



Session guide

1. **Ask:** What are different ways we communicate? [Answers: words, sounds, silence, voice, body, eyes, and face.]
2. **Ask** for volunteers to act out different emotions in front of the group by moving their bodies and facial expressions and not speaking. The other participants will try to guess what emotion is being acted out. **Whisper** one of the emotions to each of the volunteers so the other participants cannot hear: anger, happy, sad, confused, tired, disappointment.
3. **Explain** that as we just saw, communication is made up of things we say and things we do not say. **Ask:** Why is good communication important in relationships? Allow participants to discuss.
4. **Ask:** What do you think is meant by good communication? Allow participants to discuss.
5. **Explain** that listening to another person is important for good communication. Often, we spend more time talking and less time really listening. Divide participants into pairs and give them the following instructions:
 - One person is Person A and one person is Person B.
 - Person A should talk for 2 minutes about some problem or concern they have. For example, a girl could be talking to her friend about her concerns that her husband has a girlfriend in town, or a man could be talking to his brother about his desire to stop drinking so much.
 - Person B should try to communicate interest, understanding and help in any way they wish without speaking.
 - At the end of 2 minutes, have pairs switch roles and repeat the exercise.
 - At the end of the second 2 minutes, the pairs should talk freely for another minute about the problems previously discussed.
6. **Bring** participants back together and **facilitate** a discussion about the exercise using the following questions:
 - How did you feel?
 - How was it when you switched roles?
 - Was your partner able to communicate without talking?
 - Did you feel that your silent partner helped you?
 - Did you feel that you listened better when you knew that you could not speak?

7. **Explain** that good communication is essential for happy relationships and it is important that we learn how to talk and listen successfully. Try to find time each day to talk with your partner. Talking about your lives is one way to feel closer and understand each other better. When you are listening, make your partner the centre of attention. Face him or her and try not to think about other things and just listen. Show that you are listening by nodding or smiling; it can help your partner feel like you are interested and appreciate what he or she is saying. If you are talking about something emotional or private, try to be on your own so there are no other distractions. Being a good listener can encourage your partner to talk with you more often.
8. **Explain** that just as listening is important, it is also important that we say what we think and feel to our partners. The following are ways we can do that:
 - If there is an issue you want to talk about, say it. Do not wait to talk about things that are important to you.
 - When you start to talk about an issue, stay focused on that issue until the two of you solve it or both agree to talk about it later.
 - Let your partner know about how important an issue is to you.
 - Say "yes" when you mean yes; say "no" when you mean no.
 - If your partner wants to talk about an issue, talk about it until you both solve it or decide to talk about it more later. Also, try not to point out your partner's guilt for doing the same thing or something worse.
 - Try to understand your partner's point of view.
 - Make an agreement that when you are talking either one of you can ask to talk about something later to give yourselves time to calm down and avoid having a conversation that is becoming destructive.
9. **Ask:** What are some common situations that cause married couples to not communicate effectively? Write down at least four examples.
10. **Divide** participants into pairs and ask each pair to role play one of the situations mentioned and how they would communicate effectively to solve it.
11. After 5-10 minutes, **bring** participants back to the group and have pairs share how they talked about the situation.
12. **Ask:** What can we do to become better at communicating in our own relationships? Allow participants to discuss.



Main messages

- Listening to the other person is important for good communication.
- Good communication is essential for happy relationships. It is important to listen carefully to our partners, as well as share our thoughts and feelings with them.

3. Healthy relationships



Session objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Identify qualities that make a marriage good.
- List the 3 C's for a good marriage.
- List things they can do to improve their own marriages.



Session guide

1. **Ask:** What are some of the different kinds of relationships that we have? [Possible answers: husband/wife, parents/children, brothers/sisters, friends, and colleagues.]
2. **Ask:** What are qualities that make a relationship good? Allow participants to discuss.
3. **Explain** that today we are going to talk about marriage and what makes a marriage healthy. Since a marriage is different from other relationships – it has different expectations and responsibilities – we are going to focus on it.
4. **Ask:** What does it mean to be married? Allow participants to discuss. They should mention the following:
 - *Commitment:* Spouses view their relationship as permanent and are willing to sacrifice and compromise personal needs for each other. Marriage is not only a commitment to another person but also to the community.
 - *Satisfaction:* Overall, individuals are happy with the relationship.
 - *Communication:* Couples share their feelings and thoughts.
 - *Effective conflict resolution:* Even though couples do not always agree, they handle disagreements in a productive and healthy way.
 - *Lack of violence and abuse:* Conflict is normal, but aggressive behaviour and violence are signs of an unhealthy marriage.
 - *Fidelity:* Spouses are sexually faithful to one another.
 - *Friendship:* Spouses respect each other and enjoy spending time together.
 - *Intimacy:* Couples are physically and emotionally intimate.
 - *Commitment to children:* The couple is committed to the well-being of all their children.
5. **Explain** that it is normal for marriages to be good sometimes and not as good other times. It is normal to have disagreements, in good marriages we solve disagreements in a positive and healthy way. Couples have to work to have a healthy marriage. Marriages are different for each couple, it is important for each of us to focus on what is important for our own marriages. **Review** the "3 C's" for a healthy marriage:
 - *Companionship:* holding deep respect for each other, enjoying one another's company, and sharing similar views on how the relationship should be.

- **Communication:** avoiding criticism and anger; disagreeing in a nice and respectful way, understanding that some problems cannot be solved immediately, solving problems together, knowing when to calm down, accepting differences, and being willing to forgive.
 - **Commitment:** Most marriages go through difficult times, but many times overcoming a difficult situation can make a relationship stronger.
6. **Ask:** Who is responsible for making a marriage work? Allow participants to discuss.
 7. **Ask** for volunteers to conduct a role play. One volunteer will play the wife and the other will play the husband in the following situation. Ask them to act out how they will solve the disagreement.

A husband and wife have a daughter, who is in standard 8. She has been accepted at a good national school. The wife wants the daughter to go to the school even though it will mean leaving the family. The husband wants the daughter to stay at home so she can be married soon.
 8. **Ask** participants the following questions:
 - Was the role play realistic?
 - Do you agree with how the dilemma was solved?
 - Would anyone like to take the place of the actors and show us how you would have solved it?
 - Do you know couples who have had a similar situation? How did they solve it?
 9. **Ask** for two new volunteers to conduct a different role play. One volunteer will play the wife and the other will play the husband in the following situation. Ask them to act out how they will solve the disagreement.

A husband and wife have five children, all daughters. The wife has been hearing about family planning at her women's group and she wants to go for female sterilization. The husband wants a son and does not want to use a contraceptive method until he has a boy.
 10. **Ask** participants the following questions:
 - Was the role play realistic?
 - Do you agree with how the dilemma was solved?
 - Would anyone like to take the place of the actors and show us how you would have solved it?
 - Do you know couples who have had a similar situation? How did they solve it?
 11. **Ask** for two new volunteers to conduct a different role play. One volunteer will play the wife and the other will play the husband in the following situation. Ask them to act out how they will solve the disagreement.

A husband went away on a trip where he got drunk and had sex with another woman. Now that he is back home he is afraid to have sex with his wife because he is worried he may have an infection and does not want to pass it to her. She is beginning to become suspicious now that he has been back almost two weeks.
 12. **Ask** participants the following questions:
 - Was the role play realistic?
 - Do you agree with how the dilemma was solved?
 - Would anyone like to take the place of the actors and show us how you would have solved it?
 - Do you know couples who have had a similar situation? How did they solve it?
 13. **Ask** for two new volunteers to conduct a different role play. One volunteer will play the wife and the other will play the husband in the following situation. Ask them to act out how they will solve the disagreement.

A pregnant wife went for antenatal care where she was tested for HIV. Her results were positive. Since she has been married, she has been faithful to her husband, but before they were married she had engaged in unprotected sex. She is afraid to tell her husband and does not know what to do. She wants him to go for testing. She also wants him to start to wear condoms to protect him (if he is not infected) and to protect them both against re-infection (if he is infected).

14. **Ask** participants the following questions:

- Was the role play realistic?
- Do you agree with how the dilemma was solved?
- Would anyone like to take the place of the actors and show us how you would have solved it?
- Do you know couples who have had a similar situation? How did they solve it?

15. **Summarize** the comments made during the role plays. **Ask:** Does anyone have any advice to share about how to improve communication between husbands and wives? Allow participants to discuss.



Main messages

- In order to have a healthy marriage, both partners should: be committed, share their feelings and thoughts, resolve conflicts in a positive way, not use violence, be faithful to each other, respect each other, be intimate (physically and emotionally), and be committed to the well-being of all their children.
- It is normal for marriages to be good sometimes and not as good other times. Couples have to work to have a healthy marriage.
- The "3 C's" for a healthy marriage are companionship, communication and commitment.

4. Talking with our children



Session objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Explain why it is important to talk with our children about sexuality.
- List ways to make talking with our children easier.



Session guide

1. **Ask** participants to stand in the middle of the meeting space. **Explain** that you will read different statements about young people. After each statement, people who agree should move to the right and people who disagree should move to the left. After participants have moved, ask a couple participants from each side to share their views. **Remind** participants that these are opinions and there are not right or wrong answers. Then bring participants back to the centre of the space and read another statement.
 - Contraceptives should be available to young people of any age.
 - Talking with young people about sex can lead to early sex and promiscuity.
 - It is worse for an unmarried girl to have sex than for an unmarried boy.
 - Condoms are the best contraceptive for youth because they protect against STIs, including HIV.
 - Young people do not like to talk with adults about sexuality and reproductive health.
 - Girls who become pregnant should be thrown out of their homes for shaming their families.
 - Teachers should not talk to our children about sex.
2. **Ask** participants to sit back down and facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions. Allow several participants to share their thoughts and feelings.
 - How did it feel to agree or disagree with these statements?
 - Were any statements easier or harder to make a decision about?
 - How do our values and attitudes affect our ability to talk with our children?
3. **Explain** that it is normal for people to have strong opinions about sexuality and reproductive health issues especially when talking about young people. Young people will be more likely to talk honestly and openly about their own values, opinions, and experiences if they feel that they are being accepted and not judged. What you think and feel will have a strong influence on how you respond to their questions. Try to be tolerant and accept that they may not share your values. Young people often ask influential adults about their own values related to sexuality and reproductive health. It can be helpful to share some of your own values and values that you learned.
4. **Facilitate** a discussion by asking participants to think back to when they were young and their bodies were changing. **Ask** the following questions to generate discussion:
 - Did your parents talk with you about puberty?
 - Where did you learn about sex?
 - Did you have access to accurate information about sex and relationships?
 - How would your life have been different if you had access to accurate information?

5. **Ask:** How many of you have children? How many of you have talked with your children about body changes during puberty, sex, relationships, and preventing pregnancy and STIs, including HIV? Allow participants to share their experiences.
6. **Explain** that parents want to protect their children against sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and pregnancy. But, many parents worry that talking with young people about sex will lead them to have sex. **Emphasize** that research from all over the world has shown that talking with young people about sex does not lead to sexual activity. In fact, it often leads to more responsible and safer attitudes towards sex, and can even cause young people to wait to have their first sexual experience.
7. **Explain** that it is normal for parents to feel uncomfortable talking with their children about sex. Some parents may be afraid they do not know the right answers or feel uncertain about the amount of information to share. It is normal to feel uncomfortable, but that should not keep you from talking with your children. Children are naturally curious about sex. When they ask you a question about sex, puberty, reproduction, or AIDS you should give honest answers without passing judgement. You can start by asking them what they already know. This gives you a chance to correct any incorrect information they have and know what other information they need.
8. **Divide** participants into pairs and explain that they will practice talking with their children using a role play. One person will play the role of the parent and the other will play the role of the child (participants can decide on the child's age and gender). **Explain** that there are many way to use questions to talk with your children about relationships, puberty, sex, and HIV and AIDS.
 Read the following questions and ask the person playing the parent to use one of the questions to start a conversation with their child.
 - Have you noticed any changes in your body?
 - Do your friends have boyfriends and girlfriends?
9. After 5 to 10 minutes, **ask** participants to switch roles. Read the following questions and ask the person playing the parent to use one of the questions to start a conversation with their child.
 - Your cousin is getting married, what are some of the qualities you would want in a husband or wife?
 - Did you see that signboard about Ukimwi? What have you heard about AIDS?
10. After 5 to 10 more minutes, **bring** participants back to the larger group. Use the following questions to facilitate a discussion about the role plays:
 - Did anyone feel like their partner did a good job in the role as a parent? Why did you think it worked so well?
 - Did asking questions seem like a good way to start a conversation?
 - Why is it difficult to talk with our children?
 - What do you think could make talking with our children easier?
11. **Explain** that if you let your children know that they can talk to you and ask you questions about any topic, including sex from an early age, you can talk with them about making good decisions about sex and preparing for how they would get out of risky situations or protect themselves. You can influence your children's health and behaviour by sharing your values, giving information, listening to their concerns, answering their questions, and helping them develop skills to avoid behaviours that may lead to HIV infection. **Remind** them that most people are infected with HIV through sexual activity, so talking with your children about sex can protect their health and well-being.
12. **Ask:** Do you think telling children not to have sex will keep them from having sex? Allow participants to discuss.

13. **Explain** that it is also important to talk with children in a way that shows that you respect them and have confidence in their ability to make decisions. If you tell young people, "Don't have sex!" they may not listen or feel comfortable talking with you. Admit that sex can be positive if it is at the right time with the right person. Explain that sex is both physical and emotional. It can bond people deeply, but it can also make people feel badly if they are not ready. Also, talk about the health and other consequences of sex. Girls and boys may need different information. For example, girls need to learn to say no firmly looking a boy in the eye when they do not want to have sex. Boys need to be told that they should never assume that girls want to have intercourse just because they do not say no.
14. **Ask:** Should children of all ages be given the same information about sex? What is appropriate for different ages? Allow participants to discuss and refer to the information in the table on the following page.
15. **Ask:** What would you say to someone who said that talking with young people about reproductive health and sex encourages promiscuity? Allow participants to discuss.
16. **Ask:** Do you think schools should teach children about reproductive health? Allow participants to discuss.



Main messages

- It is normal for parents to feel uncomfortable talking with their children about sex, but that should not keep you from talking with them.
- Research from around the world has shown that giving children accurate information about sex does not increase sexual activities, and can even delay sexual activity.



Background notes

Sexuality

Sexuality can be complicated to understand. Sexuality includes our thoughts and feelings about sex, feeling attractive, being in love, religious and cultural views on sexual activity, feelings about a changing body during adolescence, sexual dreams, crushes, hugging, kissing, touching, how we define what is male or female, how we love, and being physically close in other ways. Just like there are many parts that make up our personality, there are many parts that make up sexuality. Our culture, traditional beliefs, and gender roles play an important part in defining what we consider normal sexual feelings and behaviour for men and women.

What is sex?

Sex is a word used to describe whether a person is male or female, but sex is also used to talk about sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse is when a penis goes into the vagina. Other sexual activities are oral sex, when a person touches their partner's genitals with their mouth, and anal sex, when a penis goes into the anus. All of these sexual activities can put people at risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Sexual intercourse puts a girl at risk for pregnancy. Sex is both emotional and physical. In addition to physical risks, there are emotional risks. Sex is attached to many emotions, and after sex people can feel disappointed.

Sex should be between two people who respect and care for each other. Sex is an emotional act. It should feel good to both people. Sex should not be used as a reward or to get something from someone. Sex should be agreed on by both people. If one person says no or stop, then it should stop. No one should be forced to have sex.

Being sexually healthy

There are things we can do to be sexually healthy. We can learn as much as possible about sex and reproduction. Most importantly, we can take the time to think about choices related to sexual activity. One of our choices is to say no to sex. When we decide to have sexual intercourse, we can remain faithful to one partner, as well as protect ourselves from pregnancy and infections.

Most people feel shy or even embarrassed about some aspects of sexuality and may not want to ask questions or talk about changes in their bodies. It is important to know that these feelings are completely normal. Many young people also feel guilty, ashamed, or bad about their sexuality. If you feel guilty feelings, ask yourself if what you are feeling guilty about is something that is harmful (or could be) to yourself or others. If it is not, then let go of the guilty feelings.

Sometimes it is hard to remain sexually healthy. We are not taught in school or at home what this means. Most young people get their information from friends, older brothers or sisters, music, and magazines, which can be incorrect and confusing. An important part of healthy sexuality is being able to tell the difference between sexual behaviours that are healthy and those that are harmful. Before acting on sexual feelings, it can help to think about what could happen if you do something. We can ask ourselves:

- Will I or anyone else be put at risk for unwanted pregnancy, HIV, or other sexually transmitted infections (STI)?
- Will acting on my sexual feelings cause any other problems, such as misunderstandings or miscommunication in our relationship?
- Will it make me or my partner feel uncomfortable?
- Will anyone's feelings get hurt?

Being sexually healthy means taking the time to think about these things before acting on sexual feelings. Being sexually healthy also includes our emotional health. Sex is attached to many emotions. Sometimes you might want to have sex to feel closer, but you can end up feeling disappointed.

Communication

Communication is the process of sending and receiving information or thoughts through words, actions, or signs. People communicate to share knowledge and experiences, give information, express feelings, and solve problems or arguments. Communication is a skill and forms the basis of all relationships. The quality of communication affects the quality of a relationship.

Non-verbal communication or body language gives meaning to what is said and includes tone of voice, facial expressions (smiling or frowning), eye contact, body position (sitting, standing, pacing, leaning forward or backward), touch, and actions. Body language can influence communication negatively or positively.

Verbal communication is when one person talks and others listen and react. The conversation can be informative, in the form of questions, a negotiation, statements, instructions, or a story. In relationships communication is usually informal. Communication misunderstandings and problems can happen when one person talks for too long, speaks too softly, interrupts the speaker, does not listen carefully, or when there are loud noises in the background or other distractions.

Listening carefully is essential for good communication. Many times the listener is busy thinking about what they are going to say and does not pay close attention to what the speaker is saying. This can cause misunderstandings and confusion. It is important to listen closely to everything that is said without interrupting and then react afterwards.

Relationships and marriage

Good relationships are based on love, mutual respect and willingness to work at the relationship. In a good relationship, both people are honest with each other. Both people feel safe in the relationship and do not worry that the other will betray their trust. Both people usually find enjoyment and pleasure in the relationship and neither person tries to control the other person or to pressure him or her into doing things. Neither person takes advantage of the other in any way.

There are several qualities that make a relationship healthy. The best relationships result from both people contributing all of these qualities:

- **Respect:** To respect another person means to honour them, to hold them in high regard or esteem, and to treat them as if they are worthwhile even if they are different from you.
- **Responsibility:** To be responsible means that others can depend and rely on you, that you do as you said you would, and you are able to distinguish right from wrong. For example, you take responsibility for taking care of your own health and well-being and that of your partner and your family.
- **Understanding:** To be understanding means to be knowledgeable about another person, to try to understand his or her position or feelings, or to listen and support someone. It means trying to put yourself in someone else's shoes, in order to understand what life looks like from their point of view.
- **Cooperation:** To work at a relationship means to put effort into the relationship, and not take the other person for granted. It involves willingness to work with someone to be in a relationship and sustain it.
- **Caring:** To be concerned and interested in another person's feelings and needs, and to want what is best for that person. It means feeling love or a liking for a person and wanting to protect that person.

Talking with our children

It is normal for people to have strong opinions about sexuality and reproductive health issues especially when talking about young people. Young people will be more likely to talk honestly and openly with adults and parents about their own values, opinions, and experiences if they feel that they are being accepted and not judged. Many people worry that talking with young people about sex will lead to sexual activity. Research from all over the world has shown that talking with young people about sex does not lead to sexual activity.

In fact, it often leads to more responsible and safer attitudes towards sex, and can even cause young people to wait to have their first sexual experience. It is normal for parents to feel uncomfortable talking with their children about sex. Some parents may be afraid they do not know the right answers or do not know how much information to share. It is normal to feel uncomfortable, but that should not keep you from talking with your children. Children are naturally curious about sex. When they ask you a question about sex, puberty, reproduction, or AIDS you should give honest answers without passing judgement. You can start by asking them what they already know. This gives you a chance to correct any incorrect information they have and know what other information they need.

Encourage your children to talk with you by letting them know that they can talk to you and ask you questions about any topic, including sex.

- **Start early.** If you start talking with children about relationships and sex from a young age they will be comfortable coming to you with questions and will more likely have correct information.
- **Look for chances to talk.** A relative's pregnancy, a newspaper article, or a radio show can help start a conversation about relationships and sex.

- Listen more than you talk. Think about what you're being asked. Listen carefully and repeat questions and comments to be sure that you understand.
- Express your values. As a parent, you can be the first person to talk with your children about these topics. When you are talking share your values and beliefs with them, but also respect their views.
- Reassure young people that they are normal - from bodily changes during puberty to their questions and thoughts about sex and relationships.
- Don't make assumptions. If a young person asks you about sex, it does not mean they are having or even thinking about having sex.
- Answer questions simply and directly. Give factual, honest, short, and simple answers.

Whatever your children's ages, they deserve honest answers and explanations. When parents do not provide children with honest answers, they may make up their own fantasy explanations, which can be more frightening than any honest answer you might offer. While you may not want or need to share all the details, try to include the information most important to them. Teach your children ways to make good decisions about sex and help them prepare for how they would get out of risky situations or protect themselves. Admit if you don't know the answer to a question. Suggest the two of you find the answer together. Your children may feel more comfortable talking with someone other than you at times. Together, think of other trusted adults with whom they can talk.

You can help your children protect themselves against HIV infection. As a parent you can influence your children's health behaviors by sharing your values, giving information, listening to their concerns, answering their questions, and helping them develop skills to avoid behaviors that may lead to HIV infection. Talking with your children about HIV and AIDS is not a conversation you have once. It is a discussion that begins in early childhood and continues throughout adolescence.

Most people are infected with HIV through sexual activity. Talking with your children about sex can protect their health and well-being. Admit that sex can be positive if it is at the right time with the right person. If you simply tell young people, "Don't have sex!" they may not listen or feel comfortable talking with you. Ask your children how someone decides it is the right time to have sex. Discuss typical reasons and share your values about when and why someone would have sex. Talk about sexual behaviour in steps. Explain that attraction begins with a smile and then can lead to holding hands, kissing, touching and onto intercourse. This means that one can stop at any step. Ask them to think about when and why you would go from one step to the next. Explain that sex is both physical and emotional. It can bond people deeply, but it can also make people feel badly if they are not ready. Also, talk about the health and other consequences of sex. Girls and boys may need different information. For example, girls need to learn to say no firmly, looking a boy in the eye when they do not want to have sex. Boys need to be told that they should never assume that girls want to have intercourse just because they do not say no.

Children will begin hearing words about sex and using sexual language as early as age five. As they grow older, they will begin learning about sex from their peers and hear random and sometimes incorrect information about sex that they may not completely understand.

Adolescents are going through dramatic biological and psychological changes and may not be comfortable talking about these changes and other issues related to their reproductive health. When young people feel comfortable and safe they are more likely to talk about issues related to their changing bodies and their reproductive health. It is important to interact with young people in a helpful, non-judgemental way in order to build a trusting relationship and rapport. The more comfortable adolescents feel, the more likely they will be to speak openly about their concerns and ask questions that are important to them. When people feel safe they speak more freely, give honest answers, ask questions and learn more.

Talking about uncomfortable topics

Young people will often giggle with embarrassment or excitement when you talk about anything to do with sex or reproduction. Do not let this discourage you or make you uncomfortable. They need accurate information on these subjects in order to make healthy choices and feel more comfortable with the changes they are experiencing. Let the embarrassment or excitement pass, wait for them to settle down, and then focus on providing them with the information they need. Young people can ask difficult questions and make shocking statements. Answer questions honestly, and if you do not have the answer, tell them you will find out and get back to them, or help them to find it. Try and see if there seems to be more to their question. You could say, "You seem bothered about . . ." or "I am wondering what made you ask that . . .?"



Gender and sexuality and relationships

Sexuality is still considered a taboo subject in many communities, especially for women and girls. Girls are expected to remain virgins until they get married, and are not expected to explore their sexuality. They are also expected to be passive and submissive in relationships. Because of these gender norms, girls and women are discouraged from exploring healthy sexual relationships and from developing the negotiating skills essential in practicing safer sex.

Parents need to familiarize themselves with the range of issues facing their daughters and sons and be comfortable addressing them. Girls face particular health concerns, especially as they approach adolescence. Puberty, sex, and relationship issues can be difficult for adolescent girls. Parents need to be sensitive to those concerns and to any accompanying emotional issues their daughters may encounter.

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