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WORDS CAN WORK™

When
Talking
With Kids
About

Sexual Health

By Jeanne Blake

Featuring

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Girls and puberty

FACT: The normal range of onset of puberty is age 8 to 14 in females.¹

As children go through puberty, they need a lot of support. They experience dramatic physical and emotional changes. If you're a parent of a preadolescent or adolescent child, you know that his or her emotions can fluctuate by the minute. Surging hormones, in part, cause these changes and can affect how children feel about themselves and others.

By talking with their parents, other trusted adults and well-informed older siblings, young people can share their concerns and get accurate information. They can learn that the changes they experience are a natural part of growing up.

Kate tries to attend all her 11-year-old daughter's soccer games. She wants to support her daughter, and she also enjoys the time with the other parents. They relax as they talk about family and work.

Kate remembers the time their conversation turned to puberty when one mom described the moods of her teenage child. "One minute

Most children are curious about when they will reach puberty.²

we have smiles," she said, "and tears the next."

The experience was familiar. Kate said, "Sounds like hormones to me."

Kate shared a strategy she'd used when her daughter Maddy went through puberty and her moods changed. "Maddy asked why she'd cry, sometimes for no reason," Kate recalled. "I told her, 'You have hormones, honey. Chemicals that affect your moods.'"

"Maddy asked why she'd cry, sometimes for no reason. I told her: 'You have hormones, honey.'"

Kate

Kate urged Maddy to chart her moods on the calendar. Doing that would help her anticipate irritable or sad feelings, she explained. It worked. Kate said it helped her, too, knowing when to give Maddy a little extra room.

Everyone liked Kate's idea. They wondered if she'd talk with *their* daughters. One mom offered to serve coffee to the mothers while Kate met privately with the girls. Kate agreed, under two conditions: the girls would choose the topics and whether they wanted to participate.

On the day of the gathering, 20 excited girls arrived ready to talk about menstruation. Kate displayed several sexual health books. "Take a little time to look at them," she said. "Let me know if you have questions. Everything we talk about stays between us."

The girls peppered Kate with questions: "When will my period start?" "Will blood gush out?" "What if I'm at my desk at school?" "What if

Building trust with your child

FACT: The majority of teens say their peers avoid talking about sexual issues with their parents because they feel embarrassed, or they don't know how to raise the subject.⁹

Responding calmly to children's questions builds trust...

Many parents are caught off guard when their child asks questions about sexuality. Some admit they've laughed, quickly changed the subject, or simply said, "What?" When parents avoid kids' questions, or flat out lie, they lose the opportunity to give the facts and share their values. Still worse, their kids might get misinformation from their peers or elsewhere.

Responding calmly to children's questions builds trust and makes it more likely they'll bring you their questions and concerns. Donna found out that it's not always easy to answer a child's questions honestly.

Donna and her husband Jack know it's important to talk about sexuality with their kids. They look for opportunities, or teachable moments. But one morning, Donna was caught off guard.

Consider This

Dr. Rauch: Dawn is right on target. It's important to talk with children about the benefits of waiting to have sex in the context of our hopes for their future. For example, "I hope you can go to college, have a family, and a satisfying career." The many conversations Todd and Dawn had with their daughter made it possible for her to tell them the truth, even when it wasn't what they wanted to hear.

Dr. Satcher: Most parents prefer that their daughters wait until they're in mature, enduring, monogamous relationships to have sexual intercourse. But we don't understand all of the reasons some people choose to become sexually active. So we have to make sure that young people have information about contraception and condoms, and access to that protection, if they choose to have sex.

Dr. Rauch: Some parents think that it's confusing to encourage children to wait to have intercourse and also teach them about protection. Adolescents *can* hear those messages side by side. Parents could say, "I'm glad you told me the truth. We've talked about the reasons to wait. Sex can complicate a relationship. Neither the pill nor condoms offer 100 percent protection. Pregnancy or disease would alter your life forever. But I want you to be as safe as possible." It's also important for parents

About 40 percent of American women become pregnant before the age of 20.³⁴