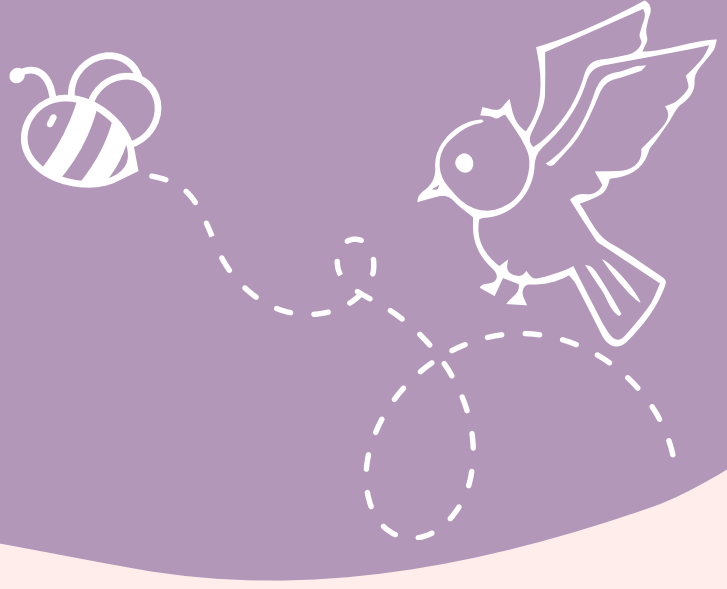
TEACHING HEALTHY SEXUALITY



Knowledge is not harmful. If we talk openly about healthy sexuality with children, we take away the mystery and secrecy about our bodies. They see you are an "askable" caregiver. Children will be more likely to ask us for help if they are confused about touching and secrets. Talking about healthy sexuality is not a one time talk, but something to return to over the years of growing up.

Sexuality is more than having sex

Sexuality is also about consent, love, relationships, gender expression, gender identity, and sexual identity. Children who come from families where sex/sexuality is discussed tend to postpone their first sexual experience and are more responsible about birth control and reproductive health when they start.

Start early

Consider talking about healthy sexuality as early as possible. For example, when you are teaching your toddler about their body parts, be sure to include “this is your penis” or “this is your vulva”. The media often gives children bits of information long before they would normally be exposed to it. It is important to ask your child what their understanding is about the topic they have raised or been exposed to, then do your best to answer the question in an honest way.

Learn Together

There are many books and websites designed for different developmental stages. Read with your child when they are younger and continue to read with them as they get older about this topic. Refer to the ABCs of CSB course workbook for a list of recommended resources.

Be askable

Set it up so your child can ask you a question any time, or use opportunities to see if they have questions. For example, while watching a show together and a scene of kissing, hugging, or dating comes up, pause and ask, “What do you think is going on here?"; "What kinds of questions do you have?” It’s OK to say “I have to look into that and get back to you”.

Model healthy sexuality

Children are more likely to engage in responsible sexual behaviour if they have healthy and positive role models. Remember they learn most of their values and attitudes from what they see, not by what they are told.

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TEACHING SAFETY SKILLS

Teach these skills as early as possible...

The names for internal and external private body parts

Teaching a child the names for private parts enhances communication between adults and children, and is especially important if inappropriate touching occurs.

Private parts are PRIVATE and SPECIAL

Private parts are private and special because:

- Private parts aren't shared with friends, neighbours, siblings, cousins, strangers, etc.
- Everyone's body is special and is their own
- If someone isn't respecting your body and private parts, they are breaking serious rules
- Private parts can help make babies
- Private parts can feel good when they are touched
- Private parts help take out toxins from our bodies (poo/pee)
- You can share private parts with someone special when you're much, much older & with permission
- Canada thinks they are special so there are rules and laws about them

Take Ownership of their Body

Once a child is able to, it's important for children to learn how to dress, bathe, wash and toilet themselves. This will teach the child boundaries around privacy. As they becomes more independent, it's important that their privacy is respected.

Tell a trusted adult if someone tries to cross their boundaries

Teach them to honour their instincts (their "uh oh" feelings), then speak up, ask questions, talk through their concerns with others. Teach them how important it is to listen to the signals their body gives them because their body and brain are always trying to keep them safe.

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TEACHING BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are a real or imaginary line that mark how comfortable or uncomfortable we are about something.

Boundaries can take many forms

Boundaries can be many things like physical, sexual, emotional, beliefs, spiritual, or time.

Boundaries change so you can't apply them to all situations

It is difficult to create a solid blueprint you can apply in all situations for boundaries because they change:

- Over time
- Across situations
- With different relationships
- With ages or developmental levels

Boundary violations usually happen when there is no consent, permission, choice, input

<u>Internal boundary violations:</u> When people hurt your emotional space to make you change your actions to suit the other person's needs (e.g., a friend demanding that you stop being friends with another person).

<u>External boundary violations:</u> When people do something to you in physical way (e.g., stealing something from you, grabbing your body without permission).

Nuance

When children are learning about boundaries, we need to teach them to distinguish nuance. Nuance means a subtle difference. For example, help them to figure out what the subtle difference is between "being quiet" when we are at a gathering of adults vs. "being quiet" when someone makes you uncomfortable or touches your private parts.

Listening to our "gut feeling" or "Uh oh feeling"

Our body's threat receptors "feel" that something is not right before we are actually able to put a thought to it. It triggers the sense that, "I need to be cautious here." Remember, your body and brain are always trying to keep you safe. Being in tune with this sense will help children speak up, ask questions, and talk through their boundaries with others.

Boundaries for kids who have engaged in concerning sexual behaviour or for children who have experienced being engaged in concerning sexual behaviour have to be recalibrated for two things:

1. **Rules:**
   Everyone's safer when everyone knows and is clear about the rules for what's considered acceptable behaviour.
2. **Respect:**
   Showing consideration or thoughtfulness in relation to someone else and that these rules will be respected for them as children.

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SECRETS

Having a "No Secrets Motto" is protective

Secrets

Secrets are things we keep without an expectation of ever telling anyone.

Safe secrets

Safe secrets are actually surprises. These are things that have an expectation of being found out, like, you don't tell about a birthday present but eventually everyone finds out. They feel fun and nobody gets hurt.

Unsafe Secrets

Unsafe secrets have something to do with making you or someone unsafe, uncomfortable or are dangerous. They feel confusing, weird, scary, hurtful, yucky, or mixed-up. They usually involve someone saying "don't tell" while you feel those feelings. These secrets are not ok to keep and need to be told to an adult right away. We want the child to keep telling until an adult listens.

Privacy is different than Secrecy

It is ok to distinguish when we keep things private. With families where sexual behaviour or sexual abuse occurred, it is ok to say, we are keeping this a private experience that we just talk about in our family, with specific adults, and with our helpers. That way children are not getting mixed messages about what to share or not share with others.

Label feelings

Feelings have sensations and they help cue us that we have to pay attention to something important. Labeling feeling helps children to be able to self-monitor and have self-awareness. Children will better talk about and share a concern if they have the words to describe their experience and how it makes them feel (especially if it makes them feel uncomfortable).

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TEACHING CONSENT

Consent is an agreement between two people. Consent should be freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic and specific.

Ask for permission first

Children are taught to ask for things all the time. For example, “Can I have a snack?“; “Can I go outside?“; “Can I borrow your pencil?“ We have to extend this practice to when they are interacting with someone else’s body as well! When a child knows that no matter what, they must ask for permission before touching someone else, it creates an extra step in their thought process. Instead of going from wanting to grab someone’s arm to immediately doing it, they are left with a moment to think in between those two actions.

We have to be "big fans" of being explicit about the consent

Being explicit means having clarity and not being confused or unsure. It's important to focus on teaching children to seek clarity if they are ever unsure about consent.

Permission can be given or taken away, anytime

It’s important for children to learn that they can change their mind and consent can be removed at any point during any interaction. It’s important to explain to children that even in the middle of a physical encounter, consent can be removed, and consenting to one form of physical contact does not automatically mean that they have consented to every physical action. As well, that familiarity with a person does not equal consent either. It is crucial to explain the importance of checking in – frequently – with whomever they are interacting with to make sure that what they are doing is okay.

The Importance of NO

The idea of empowering a child who broke private part rules can make caregivers nervous. It is ok to teach your child that they have the right to say “No” to any situation or physical contact that makes them uncomfortable. This ultimately helps them learn to become a separate individual who knows their own mind, knows what they want, and specifically what they don’t want. This creates opportunities for self-control and respectful actions toward others.

Saying nothing or not responding has meaning

It’s important for children to learn that silence isn’t consent. The definition of enthusiastic consent is this an active, visible, undeniable “yes.” Usually the idea of enthusiastic consent falls under discussions of sexual interactions. However, introducing the idea of enthusiastic consent when discussing consent with children can combat much of the ambiguity that they might face. The discussion with children can be about the fact that a non-response is not the same thing as someone saying “yes.”

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