

No Perfect Way To Discuss Sex

Dr. Sandra R. Scantling | Intimacy, Sex & Relationship



July 27, 2008

Up until this moment, it could have been any other Sunday morning in the Collins family.

Jane, Artie and the three kids have just gotten back from church. Jane is busy preparing breakfast. Artie is at the center island thumbing through the newspaper while the 10-year-old twins, Lola and Monica, are absorbed in video games. Suddenly Jimmy, 13, pipes up: "Hey dad. Can you help me with a special summer school project?"

"Sure," Artie says without hesitation. "What's up, kid?"

"Well ... our teacher wants us to ask our parents what they think is the right age to start having sex."

Jane nearly drops the stack of pancakes as the twins break into giggles.

This is one of those moments so many of us dread. We want to do the "right thing" but might not feel adequately prepared. What do you hear yourself saying?

Do you shrug off Jimmy's question with a cryptic one-liner like, "You can have sex when you're old enough to know better."

Or retort, "That's easy. You can have sex when you're married — period. We have nothing more to discuss. ... I'm going to call that school and find out what they're teaching you there!"

Or maybe you say what Artie did: "This is an important question, Jimmy. Let's talk about it later when we have a little more time." (A good approach as long as "later" isn't a decade from now.)

After a private talk, Jane and Artie agree to talk to the kids separately. But the subject of sex isn't easy for Jane, raised in a strict Pennsylvania Dutch home. In her mind, Lola and Monica are still her babies (even though Monica is starting to show some early signs of breast budding). With all the publicity about teen and pre-teen pregnancies, peer pressure and STDs, Jane wants the girls to have accurate information and good self-esteem.

To get herself up to speed, she finds a book that covers pre-teen sexuality and relationships in age-appropriate language (with age-appropriate illustrations). She gives each girl a copy, telling them to dog-ear any pages that interest them.

Lola and Monica can't wait to dig in. They jump on the sofa and start reading. The next day they ask to have their special chat. Jane is as nervous as the time she gave her high school valedictorian address. But the talk goes off without a hitch.

Instead of a single lengthy tell-all session, Jane decides on a few shorter talks. She is unexpectedly comfortable and informative without being preachy. She just tells it from the heart.

"Sex is a special sharing between adults who love one another," she says.

The three of them discuss all kinds of things, from basic information about caring for your body and menses to some not-so-basic issues about sexual responsibility and setting boundaries.

"But what if all the kids are doing it?" asks Lola. "We don't want to be dorks."

"How about we practice saying no," suggests Jane.

Together they turn this important life lesson into a fun game.

On the guy side of the equation, Artie has a talk with Jimmy on the practicalities of sex. A former Marine, Artie enlisted when he was 18 and married Jane just before his 20th birthday. He believes in a direct, no-nonsense approach.

"If you're old enough to die for your country at 18, then you're old enough to have sex. Just be safe about it," he says.

He speaks with Jimmy about controlling natural urges, using condoms, avoiding STDs, preventing pregnancy and not bringing dishonor to himself, the person he's with or his family.

When it comes to talking to their kids about sex, parents are sometimes afraid they'll open a Pandora's Box. They worry they'll get questions about oral sex or other tough topics. I can assure you those aren't the questions teens — many of whom consider themselves experts — ask most often. What teens need is fact-based reliable information, a safe place to voice their concerns and debunk myths, parental guidance and reassurance that their feelings are normal.

Sexual content floods our kids from every street corner, magazine cover and provocative video. Egg/sperm diagrams are included in all biology texts, but teen pregnancy rates are on the rise. When the totality of our sex talk focuses on "the birds and the bees," we do this profoundly intimate multidimensional subject an enormous disservice.

Readiness for sex isn't about agreeing on some magical age that signifies adulthood. It's a much thornier question. Love, maturity, responsibility and self-respect are all part of the broader social context. If parents don't help their kids sort this out, who will?

The fact is, there's no perfect one-size-fits-all approach for discussing sex — but it's important that we give it our best shot.

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