

Sexuality is an integral part of development throughout the life span, involving gender roles, self-concept, body image, emotions, relationships, religious beliefs, societal mores, as well as intercourse and other sexual behaviors. ~ Patricia Barthalow Koch



## Healthy Sexual Development

Parents have the biggest influence on their children's behavior, especially when children feel connected to their parents and families (<http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/reprint/278/10/823>). (Not, as you might think, advertisers, television, movies, the Internet or other social media, or other teens.) So keep communicating with your children—even if the topic is one that makes you uncomfortable.

High on the list of “uncomfortable topics” is often sexual development and sexuality. However, beginning the conversation early can make it easier to continue to meet your growing child's need for information (learn more at [www.talkingwithkids.org/sex.html](http://www.talkingwithkids.org/sex.html) English en Español).

Healthy sexual development and sexuality is an important part of a child's overall healthy development, and is more than just teaching your child about sex. It includes helping your child:

- Develop healthy relationships with others
- Learn appropriate ways to show affection
- Learn about the body and parts that are private
- Develop a healthy body image so your child is comfortable with who he or she is
- Learn when and where it is appropriate to display sexual behaviors
- Learn the difference between love and sex
- Learn how to make responsible decisions about being sexually active



**Infancy:** Healthy sexual development begins in infancy. In fact, sexual development and sexuality is a “conversation” that begins at birth – even though you don't necessarily use words. Babies' first experiences with how they feel about their bodies begin with caresses and other loving responses to their needs. When you hold your baby close and respond to your baby's needs with smiles, hugs, rocking, and feeding, your baby feels safe and loved. This sets the tone for how your baby will respond to other close relationships later in life.



Family Voices is a national grassroots network of families and friends speaking on behalf of children with special health needs. Our children are also part of the wider world of children. With an Improving Understanding of MCH grant, Family Voices works to encourage partnerships between families and professionals for children's good health. **Bright Futures: Family Matters** is a publication to share with your networks. Check out our Family Voices web sites at [www.brightfuturesforfamilies.org](http://www.brightfuturesforfamilies.org) and [www.familyvoices.org](http://www.familyvoices.org).

**Early Childhood:** Children begin to notice the differences between boys and girls' bodies. They may begin to touch themselves. It's a good time to talk about modesty and private parts. Make sure your children understand that NO ONE touches their private parts except for a trusted adult. Believe your children if they tell you someone made them uncomfortable.

**Middle Childhood:** Five to 10 year olds are learning how to respond to other people's feelings, and how to build family relationships and friendships. They also wonder about their bodies, how they work, where babies come from, and about sex. Help your child understand differences in body types and the changes to expect as they grow. Use the correct names for body parts. Young children with special health needs or disabilities may need more help understanding how the body changes.



**Adolescence:** Talk with your teens about relationships, and respect and understand your teen's choices about sexual identity ([www.familiesaretalking.org/](http://www.familiesaretalking.org/)). In their circle of friends, your teen may experience a first 'crush,' and be ready to explore the idea of romantic relationships. You might discuss reasons for delaying sexual relations, and talk about sexually transmitted infections, and birth control. Youth with special health needs/disabilities have similar questions and feelings. Help your teen learn about how his or her disability may affect sexual development and sexuality. He or she may need additional supports to understand changing relationships with others, and the importance of avoiding risky behaviors.



**Additional Resources:** Your child's primary health provider can work with you to help you promote your child's healthy sexual development. Learn more about child sexual development, & read suggestions for supporting your child at each age/stage at [www.pacwcbt.pitt.edu/Curriculum/203%20Sexuality%20of%20Children%20Healthy%20Sexual%20Behaviors%20and/Handouts/HO%203-1.pdf](http://www.pacwcbt.pitt.edu/Curriculum/203%20Sexuality%20of%20Children%20Healthy%20Sexual%20Behaviors%20and/Handouts/HO%203-1.pdf).

- ▶ The American Academy of Pediatrics hosts a Parent Corner where families can read about Talking with Your Young Child About Sex ([www.aap.org/publiced/BR\\_TalkSexChild.htm](http://www.aap.org/publiced/BR_TalkSexChild.htm)) & Talking with Your Teen About Sex ([www.aap.org/publiced/BR\\_TalkSexTeen.htm](http://www.aap.org/publiced/BR_TalkSexTeen.htm)).
- ▶ There's a compendium of resources about sexuality and children/youth with disabilities or chronic illnesses at [www.med.umich.edu/yourchild//topics/disabsex.htm](http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild//topics/disabsex.htm).

Note: This material is adapted from Family Voices Bright Futures: Promoting Healthy Sexuality and Sexual Relationships.

**Invitation!** We are updating our Bright Futures Family Pocket Guide. If you're interested in giving us advice or helping us review, please contact Betsy Anderson at [banderson@familyvoices.org](mailto:banderson@familyvoices.org).

## Partners...



The mission of the  
**American Bar Association**  
(ABA) **Center on Children and the Law**, a

program of the Young Lawyers Division, is to "improve children's lives through advances in law, justice, knowledge, practice and public policy." The Center focuses on children in the court system – children in foster care or in the care of child welfare agencies due to alleged abuse or neglect. They create educational materials for judges, attorneys, parents, foster parents, court-appointed special advocates, and other lay advocates to educate them about the health and development needs of court-involved children. They have also researched attachment issues for children who have lived with multiple foster families. And, many court-involved children have special healthcare needs. In order to make sure children with special health needs receive needed supports, the Center has prepared resources so judges, attorneys and others are aware of the full range of available services, including Medicaid and IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). They also have practice and policy briefs that provide basic information about issues children face, with examples of how to apply the information to improve children's lives. Contact the ABA to learn about the Center's projects, child law practices and more.

**American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law**  
740 15th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005  
Telephone: (202) 662-1720 or Toll-free: (800) 285-2221  
<http://www.abanet.org/child/>

## Family Resource Corner



Are you concerned about someone's heart health? Do you wish there was a way to remind your children to wash their hands and brush their teeth without nagging? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a card for that! The CDC has created Health-E-Cards. Send electronic greeting cards, free of charge, with health messages and Web sites for more information. Preview these engaging cards, which cover a wide range of health issues in English *en Español* at [www2a.cdc.gov/ecards/browse.asp?actbtr](http://www2a.cdc.gov/ecards/browse.asp?actbtr).

School is back in session. Your child's 'thirst' extends beyond the thirst for knowledge. Visit the Harvard School of Public Health Web site for guidance about healthy drink choices that will quench a child's thirst outside of class. Learn more at [www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/healthy-drinks/](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/healthy-drinks/).

40 years ago, you may have crowded around a TV to watch Apollo 11 land on the moon. If you'd like to experience this historic event with your children, gather around a computer to watch the launch, moon landing, moonwalk and more at <http://wechoosethemoon.org/>.

FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, has an interactive Web site for kids at <http://www.fema.gov/kids/>. The goal is to help children understand and prepare for different types of disasters. The site not only addresses things kids can do, it also talks about how they might feel. In addition, there are links for parents and teachers. Some FEMA materials are available in other languages at <http://www.fema.gov/media/resources/languages.shtm>.

## What's New in Research?



If you want to lose weight, in addition to eating healthy foods and being physically active, there's one more activity you might want to add to your daily regime – get more sleep. (Read the full article at [www.popsoci.com/scitech/article/2009-02/unusual-suspects-0](http://www.popsoci.com/scitech/article/2009-02/unusual-suspects-0)). The National Sleep Foundation at [www.sleepfoundation.org/](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/) (English *en Español*) and the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) (English *en Español*) have research that confirms we are sleeping less and eating more. Apparently, appetite-stimulating hormones increase with sleep deprivation, while the level of



hormone that helps people recognize when they are full, decreases. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is conducting research about this phenomenon in teenagers (<http://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT00841347>).

And, it seems that lack of sleep and increased appetite may be a vicious cycle. A study at Penn State University College of Medicine indicates children who are not at a healthy weight do not always get a good night's sleep. Researchers observed the nighttime sleep of 700 children. Children with larger body masses were more likely to have sleep disturbances, ranging from mild snoring to 5 or more pauses in breaths/hour of sleep. These sleep-disordered breathing problems can affect a child's behavior ([http://www.eurekalert.org/pub\\_releases/2009-06/aos-wsa052209.phpl](http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2009-06/aos-wsa052209.phpl)).

## Tidbits for the Month

The hope is that every time a teen, or any driver, gets behind the wheel of a car, she arrives at her destination safely. Unfortunately, due to inexperience, teen drivers are at greatest risk for crashes. Raising awareness about distractions such as talking on cell phones & texting while driving, not driving under the influence or speeding, and the use seat belts should be an ongoing conversation between parents and their teen drivers. **National Teen Driver Safety Week** observed **October 18 - 24, 2009**, is a time to get the entire community involved in promoting teen driver safety. Learn more at <http://stokes.chop.edu/programs/youngdriver/ntdsw2009.php>.



**Not Your Mother's Flu Season** - With recent outbreaks of H1N1 (Swine Flu), the upcoming flu (influenza) season may be a more anxious time than in past years, especially for individuals with special health care needs. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services has information and updates about seasonal and H1N1 flu. General precautions include getting vaccinated, covering coughs, washing hands frequently, and staying home when sick. For specific information about vaccinations, prevention, symptoms, and more recommendations about how to keep our children and families safe, visit [www.flu.gov](http://www.flu.gov) (English *en Español*).



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### Share your news with others!

We love to hear from partner & family organizations. We invite you to share news about your organization's programs & activities. To share your tidbits and/or subscribe to this publication, email Betsy Anderson, IMPACT project director, at [banderson@familyvoices.org](mailto:banderson@familyvoices.org).

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