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The Chat Age Guide

Ages 2-3

Where they are at: Curious about their private parts and sometimes those of others.

What they need to know:

- The right words for private body parts, such as penis, vagina, scrotum, genitals, breasts etc. When we teach them the correct names, they have no overwhelming shyness about that part of their bodies. Using cutesy names for these but not for other parts of the body can cause confusion.
- They should understand that these parts are not bad or dirty, but are private. They should know that they are not to be touched by anyone but themselves, a doctor or nurse during a specific medical exam or a parent if necessary.
- Modesty, privacy of those parts of the body should be emphasised. Explain that they should not touch their private parts excessively or in public. Never scold them about this, rather speak gently so as not to cause them to feel shame.

Age 3-5

Where they are: Magical thinkers. If they don't get accurate, factual information, they will make up a story to explain things.

What they need to know:

- Answer all questions honestly (no storks!).
- Where a baby comes from. They won't understand all the details of reproduction so a simple "A sperm from dad and an ovum from mom came together inside mom's tummy which made a tiny baby. Mom has a uterus inside her tummy, where you lived until you were big enough to be born". Later they may ask how a baby is born. Stick with the literal response: "When you were ready to be born, the uterus pushed you out through Mommy's vagina." Some kids may ask more questions about how the seed got there, but most will be satisfied with that.
- Remind children that areas covered by swimming costumes are off-limits to other people as children can be quite curious at this age. Again, if you find them in the act of genital show-and-tell with a sibling or friend, never address this with shame. Just keep emphasising that your child's body is private and precious and off-limits to other people. And that the same applies to their friends' bodies.

Age 6-9

Where they are at: Widely curious about the facts of life. Often questions like "Where do babies come from?" or "What is sex?" will come up. This age group presents the perfect window of opportunity to talk about sex, since kids are better able to understand concepts, but they are not old enough to be super-embarrassed. In general, let your child's natural curiosity guide you, although if they don't ask you may have to initiate.

What they need to know:

- The basics of sexual intercourse. Avoid euphemisms like sleeping together or making love. "Having sex" is the most clear-cut. "Sex is when a man puts his penis in a woman's vagina. It is only for adults." You can say, "God created male and female bodies to fit together like puzzle pieces. When the penis and the vagina fit together, sperm, which look like tiny tadpoles, swim through the penis and up to the ovum." Explain that sex is something special and that marriage is the best and safest place for it.
- They may ask additional questions like: how does the baby grow, how does it come out, is it painful, how does it get out such a small hole? How come so-and-so has a baby and she's not married? Give matter of fact answers. How deeply you delve into the complexities of adult life is dependent on the age and readiness of your child and upon your life-situation. Without condemning others or justifying irresponsibility, we do need to teach them that sexual

activity should not be taken lightly. Sex between one man and one woman who are married and committed to each other is the safest and most pleasurable place for sex.

- If they ask questions that shock you, don't scream and run for cover. Answer factually. You may be asked questions about oral sex or rape. If you think your children are ready for it, answer by giving the simple facts. If we have covered the basics well, these questions are much easier to answer. The important thing is that we address all questions calmly and without fear or shame, but with an understanding of consequences.
- Puberty happens earlier these days. It is very scary for girls if they are unprepared. Use teachable moments (like your tampons in the bathroom cupboard) to teach about menstruation.
- As we answer all these questions, we want to be accurate while always reinforcing the fact that sexuality is a beautiful, precious thing which, at the right time with the right person, is incredible. It is imperative that we avoid judgment, condemnation or fear. We are imparting knowledge while building self-esteem and self-worth.

Age 9-12

Where they're at: "Gross-me-outer". Sex is gross and you are disgusting for wanting to talk to me about sex. Many tweens are already convinced they know it all and may be using sexual lingo without really knowing what it means. Hormonal rollercoaster with lots going on in their bodies. They are starting to be exposed to the highly sexualized on-line world.

What they need to know:

- Changes which will happen during puberty: pimples, periods, hair growth, breast budding. Also be ready to discuss sex-related topics your child sees in the news or on social media.
- By 12 kids are formulating their own values, so check in every so often to provide a better context for the information your child's getting. Don't assume your kids will absorb your family's beliefs and values through the air.
- This is a good time to talk about consequences, responsibility and future behaviours (how to break up with someone, what to do if someone likes you and you don't like them, healthy boundaries). But avoid overkill or you'll be tuned out. At this age the car is a great place to have conversations (actually at any age) because sometimes kids feel more comfortable to talk about stuff if they don't have to make eye contact. Also for parents!
- Ongoing dialogue regarding technology is important. Equip your tween to be a safe, responsible technology user. Remember most social media has an age restriction of 13. Don't give access to social media too early.
- Pornography must be spoken about. In South Africa the average age of exposure to porn is 11. Talk about porn in general terms, avoiding explicit descriptions. Tell them to come to you immediately if they see it, so that you can help them process it.

(This age guide was adapted from an article entitled *Age-by-age Guide to Talking to Kids about Sex* which was published on www.todaysparent.com)