



Research About **Supporting Parents Communicating with Children Aged 4–9 Years about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up**

For parents, teachers and those working with young children

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About this booklet

This booklet presents findings from the research report *Supporting Parents Communicating with Children Aged 4–9 Years about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up*. The study involved talking to over ninety parents in Ireland.

Developed by the HSE Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme, this summary of research is one of a series that aims to share research findings in a concise and easy-to-read format.

Parents are the primary educators of their children in all aspects of their development. The family is the place where children first learn to love and care for themselves and others. Children absorb spoken and unspoken messages from birth about relationships, sexuality and growing up. Many children have a natural curiosity about their bodies and parents feel that it is important to educate their children about relationships, sexuality and growing up. However, it isn't always easy for parents to do this in practice.

In order to support parents in this area, this research study sought to understand more about the challenges they face in having these conversations with their young children.

The research found that parents' own experiences of learning about relationships and sexuality play an important role in how they talk with their children. While many parents want to have open and honest conversations about the body, relationships and sexuality with their children from a young age, they often lack confidence doing this and fear 'getting it wrong'.

Parents have conflicting concerns. They want to be able to provide their children with 'sound' information that will reassure them and satisfy their curiosity. Yet they also have concerns about damaging what they describe as their children's 'innocence' by giving them an inappropriate level of information, and about being judged by other parents.

This booklet sets out some of the main points raised by parents in the research. It also includes a list of helpful resources and training courses. We hope that it will be a useful and relatable source of information for parents and will support broader discussions on this topic.

Parents' experiences of learning about relationships, sexuality and growing up

Sex as 'taboo'

- The way parents talk to their children about relationships, sexuality and the body is greatly influenced by their own experiences as children.
- Many parents grew up in homes where their own parents were unable or unwilling to talk with them about sex and sexuality.
- Many parents remember their childhood understanding of sex as a taboo subject associated with sin and shame. They 'knew not to ask' about the body and sexuality as children; they felt it was wrong. Such behaviour reflected the treatment of sexuality in Irish social and cultural life at that time.
- A small number of parents remembered openness in communicating with their own parents. For these parents, feelings of taboo and shame were absent.

Poor communication

- Some parents had received the 'big talk' at home but couldn't remember much of the content because of the uncomfortable atmosphere in which the experience occurred.
- Some parents had been given a book on the subject by their parents, with the understanding they must read it themselves and not ask questions.
- All parents said they received very little sex education in school.
- Many parents said they had learned about sex and sexuality through life experience.

Parents' experiences of communicating with their children about relationships, sexuality and growing up

Aspirations

- Parents want to create an open culture around talking about sex and sexuality and to break the taboo and silence they experienced as children.
- Parents aspire to having open conversations with their children about relationships, sexuality and growing up from an early age so that they will feel able to raise any questions, issues or feelings with them as they grow up.
- Parents want their children to have a healthy attitude towards their own body.
- In general, parents feel it is very important to avoid negative responses that might suggest sex and sexuality are things of shame. They feel their children are aware that certain questions are sensitive.

"It rubs off from your parents' generation, that around this part of it, it was embarrassing, parents didn't want to know... like with the church and things like that, it was like, it wasn't talked of. And I suppose as each generation, it's still probably in our eyes a dirty little thing to probably sit and speak to your 10 year old maybe about it "

"Yeah from my parents, do you know, like if my mother saw something on the telly that was kissing, it was 'turn that off', do you know like, it was wrong ... and I don't want to pass on that message of ... that sex is wrong and it is dirty, I definitely don't want to pass that on."

"Early secondary school. I think it was more she was more concerned with me finding out from other people before I was ready to hear about – although she probably had no idea how much I knew already. So I was given a book then as well. I was told, basic kind of run through, 'there's the book, read that'."

"I do kind of intend to ... to be pretty open ... but not alienating as well and not stigmatising it. I think those are the things I want to avoid. I don't want to alienate [my son] by giving him too much information or not enough information, again the balance. And I don't want to stigmatise anything, like it is your body."

Experiences in practice

- Parents generally considered talking about sexuality and the body to be a 'difficult talk'.
- Parents referred to 'winging it', 'faltering' and 'fumbling through', reflecting their portrayal of how they communicate with their children.
- Parents are aware of their children's natural curiosity about the body, relationships and sexuality, which is evident in their play and the questions they ask.
- Parents say that responding to their children's observations about their own body and their parents' bodies is a key way of teaching the differences between male and female bodies.
- Parents generally feel that simple messages adequately answer younger children's queries about the body and sexuality.
- Some parents use the correct anatomical names for genitals with their children as they want them to understand that these are parts of the body like any other and should not be associated with discomfort or taboo.
- Other parents feel that the anatomical names are harsh and crude for young children and instead use euphemisms such as 'willy' and 'mary'. Parents tend to find it more challenging to use the correct terms for the female body than for the male body.
- Parents recognise children's interest in the pregnancies of family members but find it much easier to explain how babies are born rather than how they are conceived.
- Some parents are concerned about how sexualised words such as 'hot' and 'sexy' have become commonplace. They encourage their children to avoid such language.

Key challenges and concerns

- Many parents lack confidence when it comes to talking with their children about sexuality issues. They feel that this self-doubt hinders how they convey messages to their children.
- Parents fear the consequences of 'getting it wrong', which in turn inhibits their communication with their children. When parents feel that they are not meeting their own aspirations in this area, they can be demoralised.
- For some parents, having knowledge about the body and sexuality is not in keeping with their perception of childhood. They are concerned that their children's innocence will be compromised if they are given too much information in this area.
- Some parents are also concerned that if they give their children information on sex and sexuality, their children might pass it on to other children whose parents might disapprove. In general, parents are concerned about what other parents think.
- Many parents who aspire to having open and honest conversations with their children find that their own upbringing makes this difficult in practice. There is strong interest in getting expert support to guide them through it.
- Parents frequently mentioned the need to 'work on themselves' in order to feel comfortable talking about and engaging with their own body and sexuality.
- Some parents expressed concern that telling children how their own body would change might frighten them.
- A concern expressed occasionally was whether their child knowing about sexual intimacy would alter how their children viewed them.

"I suppose a lot of it has to do with wording, like some words are so harsh, well you think they're harsh for kids, words like vagina and stuff like that. There's simpler words, not harsh like"

"I, probably, you know, when it was, it was mentioned, sort of ducked and dived a bit about answering the question recently, but I think it would be far, far healthier to have a proper conversation about it sooner rather than later and for it not to be [avoided]."

"I've definitely had failures, you know. I give myself a big F as well, you know. And there has to be something there, you know, to educate the parents on how to educate their children. At the moment there is not".

"It's a very fine line because you're trying to teach them to protect themselves, without again back to the whole spoiling the innocence. They're only children for at most 10 years of their life, and the rest of their life until the day they die they're an adult and you know they know everything about sex. You should try and protect them."

"I'd be afraid of my child knowing that, telling another child that a parent didn't want ... their children to kind of know, if I'm being honest, you know what I mean like."

"I think it's tricky to talk to your children about their bodies. And something that needs care and thought and I suppose, you know, I feel that I'm getting to the point where, you know, I need to get up to speed on what is appropriate: when and how to manage their questions really."

Parents' views on the role of schools and other resources

Role of schools

- Parents feel vaguely informed about the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum in their children's schools, within which Relationships and Sexuality Education is taught.
- Parents see schools as key and trusted resources and feel confident to follow the lead of the school curriculum in understanding how and when to approach communicating with children about relationships and sexuality.
- Many parents feel more confident talking to their children about sexuality after the topic has been introduced in school. They believe it is positive that children are taught the same messages at home and in school.
- Parents feel SPHE material should be provided by schools to reinforce the messages and communication practice at home.

Books and the Internet

- While many parents use books in the early years of parenting, very few say they use any resources to support them in talking to their children about the body, sexuality and relationships.
- Some parents find material on the Internet, but they are often wary about the source of the information and unsure about its suitability.

"To be honest with you I wasn't aware that, you know, there was any kind of precursor to the talk in fifth class, within the curriculum. I didn't know about it."

"I'd have to say I don't really know about any materials. It's kind of just been more an organic thing, you know. If something arises, I try and deal with it ... As of yet I probably feel myself that they were a little bit young, I feel like I can get away with it for a while longer before I need to kind of go into the bookshelf and, you know, get myself some specific resources, so just been sort of winging it to be honest."

Key messages

- Parents generally considered talking with their children about sexuality and the body to be difficult.
- 'Winging it', 'faltering' and 'fumbling through' were terms used by parents to describe how they communicate with their children in this area.
- Parents and children communicate about the body, sexuality and relationships in diverse ways.
- Most parents are keen to develop a sense of openness, confidence and ease around the body in order to provide their children with a better experience than they themselves had when growing up.
- Parents want to have the skills and confidence to be an effective and reassuring source of information for their children.
- Many parents feel unprepared and unsure about talking to their children about the body, relationships and sexuality, which can make the prospect of conversations on these topics daunting.
- Parents face a number of barriers and challenges in responding to their children's curiosity about sexuality and relationships. These include their own experiences as children, low levels of confidence, fear of 'getting it wrong', fear of being judged by other parents and a lack of supports.
- Parents view schools as key and trusted resources when it comes to Relationships and Sexuality Education in the context of SPHE. They see the curriculum as a way of providing all children and parents with standard messages. They identify the potential for better communication between parents and schools.
- Many parents recognise the gap between their aspirations and what they are providing to their children. They feel that they need support in this area.
- Many parents recognise the need to 'work on themselves' in order to feel comfortable talking about and engaging with their own body and sexuality.

Need Help? Practical support for parents

For parents of young children


- **HSE: Sexualwellbeing.ie** is the HSE's sexual health website. It has a section to help parents talk with their children about relationships, sexuality and growing up. www.sexualwellbeing.ie
- **HSE: Caring for Your Child 0–5 years** is a series of information booklets on all aspects of a child's development, including sexual health. www.mychild.ie
- **Department of Education and Skills: Stay Safe** is a programme that promotes personal safety skills and is taught in most primary schools. Its website has a section for parents. www.staysafe.ie/parents.htm
- **Department of Education and Skills: Webwise.ie** offers advice and information for parents to help them promote online safety to their children. www.webwise.ie/parents/
- **Belongto** is the national organisation supporting young LGBTI people and their parents www.belongto.ie
- **TENI** is the national organisation supporting transgender people, including young transgender people and their parents www.teni.ie
- **NSPCC: PANTS (The Underwear Rule)** is a simple tool for teaching children about personal safety. The UK website contains guides for parents and teachers and a range of materials for children, including an animated video with the PANTS song and a downloadable video game. The children's guides are also adapted for children with disabilities and autism and there is a video for children who are deaf. www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/underwear-rule/

The HSE Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme is currently developing a resource for parents of young children, to help them to respond to their curiosity about the human body and how babies are born. The resource *Talking to Your Young Child about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up* will consist of two booklets; A parent's guide of the same name and an accompanying story booklet *Tom's Power Flower- a gentle explanation of how babies are made*. The resource will be available to parents late in 2018 and will be free of charge.

For parents of adolescents

- **HSE: Sexualwellbeing.ie** is the HSE's sexual health website. It has a section to help parents talk with their children about relationships, sexuality and growing up. www.sexualwellbeing.ie
- **HSE: Busy Bodies** is a free DVD and booklet on puberty. It is commonly used with 5th and 6th class children in school and at home. www.healthpromotion.ie/health/inner/busy_bodies
- **HSE: You Can Talk to Me** is a free DVD and booklet to help parents talk with their 11 to 15 year-olds about sexual health. Available to order from www.healthpromotion.ie.
- **HSE: Advice for Mams & Dads – Talking to Teenagers about Relationships & Sex** is a free supplement to assist parents of older adolescents in talking with their teenagers about relationships and sexuality. www.healthpromotion.ie/hp-files/docs/HCP00671.pdf
- **HSE: B4uDecide.ie** is the HSE's website on relationships and sexuality for young people. It also has sections for parents, teachers and youth workers. www.b4udecide.ie/parents/
- **Belongto** is the national organisation supporting young LGBTI people and their parents www.belongto.ie
- **TENI** is the national organisation supporting transgender people, including young transgender people and their parents www.teni.ie

There is also a range of good quality commercial resources to assist you further in talking to your children of all ages about relationships and sexuality.



Parenting courses and support

• National Parents Council – Primary

The National Parents Council – Primary (NPC) offer parents a training course entitled, *Supporting your child to build healthy friendships and relationships*. This can be accessed online or can be requested as group training for your school. For more detail see www.npc.ie/training.aspx. The NPC also have a helpline for parents on: 01 887 4477

• Irish Family Planning Association – Speakeasy

The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) offers, *Speakeasy*, a course designed to provide parents, guardians and carers with the information, skills and confidence needed to talk to their children openly about relationships, sexuality and keeping safe. They also offer *Speakeasy Plus* for parents of children with a physical or intellectual disability or with extra support needs. For more detail see www.ifpa.ie/Education-Training/Programmes

Want to read more?



- The research report summarised in this booklet is, *Supporting Parents Communicating with Children Aged 4–9 Years about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up* by Dr Catherine Conlon. The full report and a concise and an easy-to-read, summary of its findings are available at www.sexualwellbeing.ie



- You might also be interested in reading this research report, *Parents' Approaches to Educating their Pre-adolescent and Adolescent children about Sexuality* by Professor Abbey Hyde, Dr Marie Carney, Dr Jonathan Drennan, Dr Michelle Butler, Dr Maria Lohan and Dr Etaoine Howlett. The full report is available at www.sexualwellbeing.ie

- The RSE curriculum and support materials for primary schools are available at www.pdst.ie/node/811.
- The World Health Organisation's, *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe: a framework for policy makers, educational and health authorities and specialists* is available at www.oif.ac.at/fileadmin/OEIF/andere_Publikationen/WHO_BZgA_Standards.pdf.

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About the HSE Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme

The HSE Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme is a national programme tasked with implementing a national strategy to improve sexual health and wellbeing and address the issue of crisis pregnancy in Ireland.