

Grandparents as Sexuality Educators

It is often said that children and their grandparents have a special bond. Even preschool children are fascinated by the idea that their parents have parents of their own. As well, children are often impressed by the fact that their *grandparents* have a certain life authority – even over their own parents! This means that children are often very open to hearing the gems of wisdom that grandparents are willing to share with them.

Most people who are now grandparents did not have much in the way of sexuality education. However, they are in a unique position to share what they *have* learned over a lifetime. Combine that with a more open attitude toward sexuality and you've got the makings of a great sexuality educator!

You may be thinking, "I don't need to worry about that for a few years yet." The truth is that being a sexuality educator isn't just about talking about sex. It is also using the correct names for parts of the body, talking about how to make and keep friends, and the importance of treating other people with respect. It is also about building a level of trust that allows your grandchild to feel comfortable asking you questions or telling you if someone does or says something inappropriate.

Sexuality education is also more than just giving information. It's also about an attitude. As you change a diaper or play at bath time, don't skip from "This is your belly button," to "This, ugh – is your knee", but include "This is your penis." or "These are your little labia (lips) or vulva." This gives the message that ALL parts of the body are wonderful and remarkable. Of course, cute little names are OK, but use the correct terms as well once your grandchild starts talking.

You may be the lucky grandparent in the check-out line at the grocery store with your grandson when he announces "Look! My penis is standing up by itself." You can give him a positive message by joining in with his sense of amazement while explaining that he doesn't have to share that information with everyone because it's private. The same applies to children touching/grabbing their genitals – and girls do this, too. There is no need for your grandchild to feel ashamed of what s/he is doing, but this is an opportunity to teach good manners. You could say, "I know it feels good to touch your pens/vulva, but you need to keep your hands out of your pants in public. It's not polite to touch your private parts when you are with other people."

A new baby in the family is an opportunity to teach an older sibling about the genital differences between boys and girls. Children can learn that their father and grandfather have penises and their mother and grandmother have vaginas. Of course, don't be surprised if your grandchild repeatedly asks "Grandma, do you have a penis or a vagina?" S/he is simply trying to get the facts straight – not embarrass you.

A pregnant relative or family friend is also a great opportunity to teach about a baby growing inside the mother's uterus. Even preschool children will want to know how the baby gets out. You can explain simply that the mother pushes the baby out her

vagina – a special opening she has between her legs. This is usually accepted quite well and is less distressing to the child than imagining other alternatives! A child who worries that this will hurt can be reassured that the nurses and doctors have ways to help a mother out so that it doesn't hurt too much.

Of course a couple of years later the questions about how the baby got into the mother's uterus will come up. This is the question most people have real difficulty answering. Sometimes this is because they don't know how to simplify the explanation. Sometimes, they worry about giving too much information and frightening the child. Remember: if a child is old enough to ask a question, s/he is old enough to get an honest (age-appropriate) answer. You can make a trip to the library to borrow a book that will help you explain this. The bonus is a bit of cuddling time while you read the book together.

As a grandparent, you may think that your grandchild's sexuality education is best handled by the child's parents. You may worry that you are overstepping your role. You can mention the incident and explain how you handled it. But remember, a good sexuality education for your grandchild means getting consistent messages from adults that s/he trusts.

If you are concerned that your son/daughter might object to what you have said, discuss it with them. Use the conversation as an opportunity to pass along information about the normal sexual development of children. On the other hand, they may be very happy that you are willing to help them out with this aspect of parenting.

Some people say that with the fast-paced development of technology, this generation of young people knows more than their parents and grandparents. While this may be true for using a cell phone or connecting on *Facebook*, it is not necessarily true when it comes to sexuality and human relationships.

Many people remember that it was easier for them, as teenagers, to talk about important issues (school, friends, drugs, religion, sexuality etc.) with someone who was not their parent – for example, a family friend or relative. A grandparent who has built a trusting and friendly relationship with their grandchildren is in a unique position to be that confidant. Check out www.familiesaretalking.org for ideas on how to have conversations about sexuality issues with the children and teens in your life.

Remember, sexuality is more than just “the birds and the bees”, and older folks DO know something about life and the important lessons that life teaches.



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