

Sex education should begin at home

Yvette:

I am writing with a question that every mother and father will have at some point. What are the best ways and age-appropriate materials to explain the subject of sex? I have a daughter who is 9 years old (and also a younger son), and the time is approaching in which my husband and I will be having several talks to educate her about the changes her body will be making, sex, diseases, etc. I want to be prepared so that this sort of information comes from home versus a playmate or school.

Alicia:

Alicia:

This is a discussion that we all know we will have to have, but it's one we dread just the same. To prepare yourself and your children, you should begin discussing their private parts with them as soon as they begin to identify specific body parts. Shari Uncapher, our clinical therapist, explains, "When children begin to understand concepts of ownership and sharing, teach them that their private parts are special and not to be shared." The starting time for this discussion should hinge upon your child's development and curiosity level. If you have children of both genders and they see each other's privates, teach them the names of the others' parts. If you have a single-gender family, you want to teach them that boys and girls are different (in a basic kind of way) before they enter kindergarten.

By second or third grade, depending on your child's development, they will have questions about from where babies come. You should answer their questions honestly in a way that is easy for them to understand. As they approach late elementary- or early middle-school years, talk about attraction and making decisions about their bodies. By late middle- or early high-school years, a parent should be engaged in full discussion with their teen about sexual activity, respect for their bodies, choice-making, etc. Remember that sex is more open now than it was when we were young. Start talking early, and clearly communicate your family's values.

Shari recommends these books for you and your daughter: *Where Did I Come From?* and *A Very Touching Book*.

Keep an open dialogue. Encourage her to talk with you about any questions she may have. Explain that these changes are normal and it means she is growing up. Get ready for the wonderful challenge but awesome experience of parenting a teenage girl. Hold on to your values; adolescents need certainty in the midst of chaos.

Yvette

Yvette:

I am a single mother with a 3-year-old daughter. I divorced her father about two years ago. I recently began dating a man from another country, and my daughter absolutely hates the idea of me being with anyone — including her father! She yells and screams at my friend and uses hateful, racist words. Her behavior is embarrassing, painful, mean and unjustified. When I asked her why she dislikes him, the only reason she gave was, "I don't know!" He has never been alone with her to give her any reason for her behavior. He never treats her badly, and he continues to be loving and calm, even when she's not. I have tried to explain how much I love her and how I can love her and many people at the same time. I put her in time-out for yelling racial slurs. Now, she goes behind my back and whispers to him how much she hates him and wants him to leave. I am extremely frustrated and hurt. I'm at a dead end. Please help.

Jameela

Jameela:

My first response is to ask where is your daughter learning racist, hateful words? The words you allude to are not common in the preschool vocabulary. Do your friends or family commonly use such words? Children learn from our example.

Your daughter's language suggests that someone is encouraging or, at the very least, engaging in this behavior when she is around. Are there others in your family who disapprove of this relationship? Is it possible that your daughter has overheard them using derogatory terms directed at your boyfriend or someone else?

Secondly, you must get control of your daughter's disrespectful behavior. It is hard to rationalize or negotiate with a 3-year-old. Children need clear, unambiguous consequences for behavior. It's important that your daughter understand that all people deserve to be treated with respect. You should not tolerate disrespect from her, nor should you allow her to be around others who are disrespectful.

You've tried time-outs and say that's not effective. What does your daughter enjoy? Is there a privilege that can be taken away that may mean more to her than a time-out? Is there a favorite toy with which she likes to play? When she goes behind your back and says something disrespectful to your boyfriend, do you discipline her immediately? When she uses these words, is she still allowed to attend the birthday party or go outside and play?

Beyond what she says, which you

Families are encouraged to send their parenting questions concerning their children's challenging or difficult behavioral issues to Brown at columbusparent@thisweeknews.com or Columbus Parent, 670 Lakeview Plaza Blvd., Suite F, Worthington, OH 43085.

must make clear is unacceptable, it's the fact that she is defiant of your authority.

Discipline is only effective if it removes a privilege that the child wants. You haven't removed the right privilege. Also, discipline must be progressive. If you give the same response each time, there is no disincentive to the child. Even at 3, she can decide that saying these remarks is worth a five-minute time-out. You must be fair, firm and consistent NOW! Gain control quickly. Set standard of behaviors that are nonnegotiable. Otherwise, you are in for a long 15 years.

Yvette

Yvette:

I have a situation with my 7-year-old stepson and his rebellious behavior towards everyone, including his full-time family. He tries his best to play both parents. He constantly starves for the wrong attention. He's mean, in his own ways, to his brothers and the parents who are trying to provide for him. I would appreciate any and all advice that you might have to better his environment and bring some peace to both sides of the family.

Mindy

Mindy:

His parents should sit down and agree on how they want to respond to his behaviors. If he is trying to play one parent against the other, the only way to stop this is for the parents to communicate and agree that they will not make

decisions without checking in with each other. The parents must also agree on how to deal with their child's anger and behavior towards his siblings.

Physical aggression is never okay, and this message needs to be sent clearly and reinforced as necessary with consistent discipline.

It goes without saying, I hope, that you cannot tell him not to be physically aggressive and then use physical discipline on him. The inconsistency of this message will not be lost on a 7-year-old. Physical discipline also teaches children that the person who is bigger gets to use physical force.

If this is new behavior, the parents should talk with their son to find out why he is so angry. Is there something going on at school? Has there been a change in the family structure: a new sibling, stepparent, death, etc. If the parents' united front and openness doesn't produce changes in the child's behavior, I suggest that they consult their pediatrician. Counseling may help this young man deal with his issues. It's important to address his concerns now. You don't want him taking his frustrations out at school.

Yvette



Yvette McGee Brown is a former Domestic Relations/Juvenile Court Judge. She is currently the president of the Center for Child and Family Advocacy at Columbus Children's Hospital.