

'Birds & bees' talk should be ongoing conversation_12405

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'Birds & bees' talk should be ongoing conversation

By Michele Melendez

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Bob Pastorio remembers feeling woozy when his children sprang out-of-nowhere questions related to sex. Even so, he said, he always answered honestly.

“We never used euphemisms, and we never used baby talk,” said Pastorio, 63, a Swoope, Va., father of four. “They notice stuff; they synthesize understanding from that.”

It isn't easy to talk about the birds and the bees—never mind the sexual images that permeate U.S. culture or sex education in schools.

Bob
Pastorio,
63, and his
youngest
daughter,
Carla, 13,
make
English
muffins
together in
their
Swoope,
Va., home.
The father
of four says
spending
time
together
fosters
openness,
and he
hopes Carla
would feel
comfortable
asking him
about
anything,
from history
to cooking
to sex.
(Photo by
Chris Rossi)

“Parents sometimes avoid talking about sex and related issues with their children because they are not sure what to say and don't want to make a mistake in what they say or how they say it,” said Paul Kettlewell, a pediatric psychologist at Geisinger Medical Center in Danville, Pa. “Talking about sex with kids makes most parents anxious.”

A recently released government report says roughly a third of 20,000 15- to 19-year-olds in 2002 never had talked to a parent about how to say no to sex, about sexually transmitted diseases, methods of birth control and where to get them, or how to use a condom.

A survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy suggests parents may underestimate their clout. Among 1,000 people 20 and older and 1,000 ages 12 to 19, only 28 percent of the older group said parents were most influential in their children's decisions about sex, while 37 percent of the youth listed parents No. 1.

Parenting experts recommend starting age-appropriate conversations years before puberty. They say to scrap the idea of one big “sex talk.”

Thomas Haller, a therapist in Bay City, Mich., and co-author of *The 10 Commitments: Parenting With Purpose*, said if parents don't have continual, informative talks before the pre-teen years, it's too late. The child has picked up clues elsewhere—friends, the Internet, television.

Pastorio remembers his own father giving him the dreaded talk during his freshman year of high school, long after he had learned the biology of sex through scientific articles and had ogled bare-breasted tribal women in *National Geographic* magazine.

“We kind of got through it, and never again, until the day I got married, did he make another sexual reference,” Pastorio remembered with a laugh.

He wanted to be more open with his own children, three of whom are

grown. He shares custody of his youngest, Carla, 13.

Carla said she would feel more comfortable asking her mother, stepmother or friends questions about sex but knows her father is a willing resource.

When she was 11, Pastorio and his wife gave her a book for adolescent girls, written in the breezy style of a teen magazine. It covered the hormonal mysteries of pimples, breasts and desire and included sections on condoms, pregnancy and homosexuality.

"I was kind of freaked out," Carla recalled. "I didn't tell them, but I think they could tell by the look on my face. It was a little too much information."

Books are a good idea, experts say. But if parents suspect receiving such a book will make their child squirm, it can simply be made available on a bookshelf.

Children "may be too nervous or embarrassed to talk with their parents, but they need the correct information," said Lissa Coffey, a Westlake Village, Calif., sociologist. "You don't need to give them the book; just have it out where they can have access to it."

Much depends on the child's personality.

"If a child asks questions or is overheard making comments about sex, you can first gently ask what they've heard and what they think is the truth," said Virginia Shiller, New Haven, Conn.-based author of *Rewards for Kids! Ready-to-Use Charts & Activities for Positive Parenting*.

It can be helpful for parents to discuss between themselves how they want to handle the inevitable.

John Hascall and his wife, of Ames, Iowa, were prepared when their son, at about age 5, blurted that perennial favorite: "Where do babies come from?"

“We just gave a simple answer like, 'Babies come from the mommy's body,' and at that age, that was a good enough answer,” said Hascall, 42, whose son now is 11. “As he's gotten older, he's asked more and more sophisticated questions, and we've always answered with what we thought was an honest answer of the same sophistication.”

Russell Arben Fox, 36, of Jonesboro, Ark., and his wife are figuring out how and when to talk about sex with their 8-year-old daughter, the oldest of three. The subject arose last year after the couple, lifelong Mormons, decided an updated movie version of the coming-of-age story Peter Pan was too advanced for her.

“Since we take our religion pretty seriously ... obviously our values have been part of what we've taught our girls thus far, and it'll be an essential part of the sex talk, whenever we have it,” Fox said. “For Mormons, sexual activity within marriage is one of the purposes of creation.”

Balancing sex and spirituality can be an added challenge for families to whom faith is important, said Jimmy Hester, coordinator of True Love Waits, an international abstinence campaign spearheaded by LifeWay Christian Resources and the Southern Baptist Convention.

But, Hester said, those conversations need to happen—even through the elementary school years—to give children a foundation they can build upon in their teen years and through adulthood. And parents must show they believe what they say by respecting their spouse and their own bodies, Hester added.

“What we really fall back on are the values that we picked up from our parents,” he said, “not the values we picked up from our peers.”