Dear Alice,

Hello. How do you feel about health care providers offering sex education to the school age child (children younger than 12)? Do you know of any resources/publications which address this issue?

Thank you!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Health care providers, including nurses, pediatricians, social workers, and health educators, care about the well-being of their patients, clients, and/or students, and are often trusted by them. Therefore, it is not uncommon for questions about sexuality and sexual health to arise in these interactions. As with most adults, providers have different comfort levels when talking about sexual health. Some may be embarrassed and uncomfortable having these discussions; others are comfortable bringing up information and answering questions that patients have. Realize that just because someone is a health care provider does not mean that s/he has specialized or has had additional training in sexual health education.

Sexual health education is a lifelong process that begins at birth. If you have a child, have you thought about what messages you want to convey and when? Have you already spoken with your child's health care provider about how you want to approach these topics? If you are a health care provider, have you talked with your patients about their needs? When it comes to sexual health education there are many resources and potential approaches that will support the well-being of young people.

Since some pediatricians have an ongoing relationship with their young patients throughout childhood, they are in a unique position to address age-appropriate issues. Parents may want to discuss their values with their child's pediatrician or other health care provider so that the messages are consistent. When discussing sexual health with school age children, providers may talk about reproductive anatomy, how the body works, puberty, body changes, and feelings that they may be experiencing now or will be having in the future. With older adolescents, discussions of sexual behavior, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and contraception are appropriate. Conversations emphasizing sexual abuse prevention skills are also common. Discussions with pediatricians or other health care providers can also educate parents about children's growth and development and what to expect. Parents can then follow...
up with discussions with their children.


While some providers may talk with young children individually in an office or clinic, they may also offer education to young people in the school setting. Depending upon the type of sexual health education that children receive in school, if at all, a provider might be invited to talk with a group or class of students. If this is the case, parents may want to talk with the teacher or principal before a health care provider speaks to a class, to find out about her or his background, training, approach, and goals.

Other resources that may be helpful include:

Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, Kindergarten ? 12th Grade [4], a publication from the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) [5]. This identifies developmentally appropriate messages related to sexual health issues. Designed as a framework to assist local communities in developing new education curricula or assessing existing programs, it can also be used as a guide for parents and health care providers.

The following books for parents can be found in bookstores and libraries:

- From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children or Beyond the Big Talk: Every Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Teens ? From Middle School to High School and Beyond by Debra W. Haffner
- Sex & Sensibility: The Thinking Parent's Guide to Talking Sense about Sex by Deborah Roffman
- Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children about Sex and Character by Pepper Schwartz and Dominic Cappello

Books for young people that are available in bookstores and libraries include:

- It's so Amazing: A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families and It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Sex, and Sexual Health by Robie H. Harris
- Let's Talk about S-E-X: A Guide for Kids 9 to 12 and Their Parents by Sam Gitchel and Lorri Foster
Along with many available resources, a health care provider is a key member of the team that can help raise happy and healthy young people. Each family will need to determine the best approach to sexual health education, including which messages are delivered, by whom, and when.

Alice!
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