



talking

with your **child**

about relationships and  
sexual wellbeing

For parents and carers

We are happy to consider requests for other languages or formats. Please contact 0131 314 5300 or email [nhs.healthscotland-alternativeformats@nhs.net](mailto:nhs.healthscotland-alternativeformats@nhs.net)

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# Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is aimed at parents and carers of primary-aged children to help support them in talking with their child about relationships and sexual wellbeing.

Everyone in Scotland should have the opportunity to have positive and respectful relationships and talking is a great place to start. Some parents/carers feel uncomfortable talking about relationships and sex with their children. Don't worry; this booklet will help you. Thinking about the questions your child might ask you will help you prepare and make these chats less daunting.

Start at an early age but keep it simple; keeping these chats going means you can give them more details as they get older. There is no 'best' person for talking and listening. Some people feel that dad should handle boys' questions and mum should talk to girls. But life is not that simple; not

every child has a mum or a dad so it's good that children are able to speak to anyone in their lives who is able to listen, help and provide support. You might also want to share this booklet with anyone who cares for your child.

It has not been possible to provide detailed information to support parents/carers of children with disabilities, but we have signposted to appropriate support in the information and support section (pages 42–43).

### **What is sexual wellbeing?**

Sexual wellbeing is a good balance of emotional, physical and social wellness relating to sexual health and is linked to your overall general health.

# Why talk with your child about relationships and sexual wellbeing?

Children are exposed to these topics through the internet, gaming, magazines, music videos and TV, often getting inappropriate and misleading information. Talking with children about relationships and sexual wellbeing can help them:

- build strong and positive relationships
- develop emotionally
- find out more about their body
- stay safe
- respect themselves and others
- delay the age they first become sexually active.

One of the main ways that children learn about relationships and sexual wellbeing is from their parents or carers. Even if parents don't talk about relationships and sexual wellbeing with their children, they give out strong messages about it without knowing, such as their reaction to TV or poster adverts. Most children are naturally curious, and from the age of about 2 they will ask questions – 'Why...?' 'What...?' 'Where did I come from?' Talking can really help. Again, keep it simple.

# What is my role as the parent/carer?

Children should receive Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education throughout their whole school life. The role of parents and carers is to be open to discussion of children's questions at home. You may be uncomfortable talking about sex. If this is the first time, however, it'll get easier with practice.

Here are some tips on how to make it easier.

- Start early (it's never too early).
- Encourage a two-way discussion.
- Keep talking with them.
- Answer questions in relation to their age and stage.
- Reassure your child that you love them.
- Be truthful and honest when talking to your child.



# When should I start talking about relationships and sexual wellbeing?

This is not a one-off chat but an ongoing process, starting when a child is small and continuing until they are an adult. Puberty can start as early as 8 for girls, and boys may also have wet dreams or erections when they are very young, so it is important that your children are prepared and not frightened of body changes.

Don't always wait until your child brings up the subject of relationships or sex; sometimes you have to be the first one to raise the subject. Talk about this in relation to their age. You could use opportunities in the media to raise the issues around relationships and sexual wellbeing. Talking with your child about all sorts of things will help you talk about these areas.

By the time your child reaches the upper years of their primary school life, it is a good idea to have discussed:

- conception (how a baby is made)
- respecting themselves and others
- what to expect at puberty and menstruation
- different kinds of relationships, including romantic relationships
- sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and AIDS (basic information)
- types of relationships, including gay and lesbian relationships
- avoiding doing things they don't want to do and keeping themselves safe, including online.

**By talking about these issues from an early age, you will be reinforcing what your child is discussing at school, watching on TV, talking about with their friends, or reading about in books and magazines. You will also be preparing them for secondary school.**

## What words should I use?

There are many different terms used for body parts and different sexual behaviours. As well as the 'correct' medical terms, children may have heard different terms at home, through their friends and the media. They may be confused about the meaning of some terms and not realise that some words can cause offence, although very young children will quickly learn their meaning through your reaction to them.

You do not have to compromise your own standards. No doubt your child will learn slang words about sex in and out of the playground, but having an open discussion about what words they know and their meaning could avoid confusion and inappropriate use.

# Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education

In addition to what they get taught at school, children still need the opportunity to talk to you as their parent/carer about relationships and sexual wellbeing. All schools must provide Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education as part of the Health and Wellbeing experiences and outcomes for Curriculum for Excellence. The way this is delivered varies from school to school. Some schools may include contributions from other professionals, such as the school nurse or other health workers.

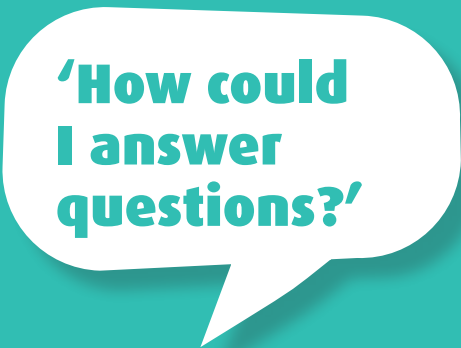
The Scottish Government has provided guidance for local authorities, schools and parents that states that RSHP education should present the facts in an unbiased, balanced and sensitive way within a framework of sound values. Curriculum for Excellence states that schools should engage with parents in their children's learning and the life of the school – this includes keeping parents/carers informed and consulted about what is being taught during each year. As a parent, if you have any questions about the RSHP education the school is providing, the first thing to do is to discuss them with your child's teacher.

For more information on Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood education please visit: Education Scotland's Parentzone: [www.educationscotland.gov.uk/parentzone/](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/parentzone/)

## Key messages

The main features of a primary school RSHP programme are likely to be:

- respecting yourself and others
- respecting individual differences
- ways to express and deal with feelings and emotions
- ways to keep safe
- developing positive and supportive relationships
- body changes at puberty
- menstruation and reproduction (how babies are made).



**'How could  
I answer  
questions?'**


This booklet does not give you all the answers – there are no right or perfect answers (or questions), and only you will know the most appropriate response to questions from your son or daughter. Here are some tips to help answer challenging questions. Following that, there are some example questions and answers.





### **Take a moment**

Don't feel like you need to answer straight away. If it's not a good time, say so, but remember to go back to answer the question later.



### **Answer the question with another question, e.g. 'That's interesting, what makes you ask that?'**

This is a way both to buy some time and also to find out the reasons or context behind the question.



### **Keep to the question**

Give them enough information to answer the question, but avoid an overload of information. Your child will ask for more if they need it.



### **Be honest**

Don't make up an answer if you are unsure. It's okay to say 'I don't know, but I'll find out for you, or we could find out together'.

## Remember:

- Many of the scenarios come from parents themselves – they won't all apply to your situation.
- It is impossible to prepare for every question.
- The answer you give will depend on your child's age and stage of development.
- The question your child asks may not be the one you are expecting. They may also 'test the water' by asking a slightly different question first. Listen and find out more before you answer.

## Tone and body language

- Your own sex life is private. You do not have to answer questions about it. Being too open can be as disturbing for children as not being open enough.
- Engage with the school to keep informed of what is being taught, as this may help predict/prepare for any questions that come up.
- Ask your health visitor, school nurse, nursery or school for ideas and help on answering questions.



**'Where did I  
come from?'**

**asks your  
4-year-old.**

This is the classic question! Before you start, it is a good idea to check the question by asking your child one such as 'Do you want to know how babies are made?'

A 4-year-old child takes things literally, so it is important to choose your words carefully and give simple responses. If your child is older (over 8), he or she may be ready for a more detailed answer.

# question

# 1

- “ Mummy and Daddy made you. You started very small and grew in Mummy’s tummy till you were big enough to come out. ”
- “ You grew inside your Mummy. A baby begins to grow when an egg from Mummy and a seed from Daddy get together. ”

## **Your 7-year-old comes back from school and asks:**



**'Am I sexy?'**

There are various sources that reflect society's obsession with being attractive. Even young children pick up these messages and can feel anxious and insecure about their appearance. You may need to check what lies behind this question.

## question

# 2

- “ You’re too young to be sexy, but you’re beautiful. Where did you hear about being sexy? ”
- “ No, but you might be seen as being sexy when you’re older. Being sexy can be about the way you feel, but also about the way you make someone else feel. ”

## **While watching the TV, your 8-year-old turns to you and asks:**



**'What does  
gay mean?'**

Children usually have no difficulty in accepting a variety of adult relationships. However, they are sensitive to your feelings and attitudes so if this is an area you have strong feelings about, or find challenging, you will need to think through your response carefully. You can find out where your child came across the word 'gay' as this is a chance to deal with any prejudice or intolerance.



## question

# 3

- Well, some men want to marry or live with women and some women want to marry or live with men. If you're a gay man, you want to be with another man, and if you're a gay woman, you want to be with another woman. What do you think about that?
- Well, when you are a grown-up, a man can fall in love with a woman and a woman can fall in love with a man. 'Gay' is when a man falls in love with another man and a woman falls in love with another woman. Our friends, Michael and Paul, are gay.

## **Your 10-year-old child sees a newspaper headline and asks:**



Children are likely to pick up the fear and loathing attached to the label 'paedophile' and may have questions about what it means. This is an opportunity to reinforce messages your children will have received in school and what you may have already told them about keeping safe.

## question

# 4

- “ A paedophile is a person who wants to have an inappropriate relationship with children. They might also want to take pictures of children wearing no clothes or touch them, and that is against the law. If anyone asks you to do something that you don't want to, then talk to an adult you can trust. ”
- “ A paedophile is a person who likes to take children's clothes off and touch their private parts. It's not nice and it's against the law. You should not let anyone touch your private parts. ”

**Your 3-year-old child is touching her genital area while sitting outside in the sun. Your 7-year-old says:**



**'It is disgusting to touch yourself!'**

## question

# 5

Masturbation can be a very difficult issue for parents because of messages picked up in their own childhood. Small children explore their genitals from a very early age as part of the normal process of development. The way you react to situations like this can be important. You need to be able to set limits for what is private behaviour in an open and matter-of-fact way without any suggestion of this being 'dirty' or 'harmful'.

- ‘ No, it’s not. Your sister is only little and doesn’t know that she shouldn’t do that in front of other people. ’
- ‘ It’s not disgusting. It’s just something big boys and girls like you know to do in private. ’

## **Your 10-year-old sees a red ribbon for World AIDS Day and says:**



**'How do you get AIDS?'**

At primary-school age, few children will have heard about sexually transmitted infections but more may have heard about HIV and AIDS. However, some will have picked up the wrong ideas and prejudices about AIDS, particularly about gay men.

As a parent, you do not have to feel that you must give an big technical answer to this question. Children are naturally curious and will not expect a 'school-type' explanation from you.

**For more information, visit  
Waverley Care**

## question

# 6

- It's a virus people may get from someone if they have unprotected sex without using a condom, or share dirty needles to inject drugs.
- You can catch the virus called HIV, which may turn into AIDS, by having sex without a condom with someone who has the virus. Do you understand that? There are other ways too. Do you want to know about them?

## **Your 11-year-old daughter says that her best friend has just started her periods.**

**When will I start? When will I get breasts?**

It is important to be open with your daughter from her first question about periods, no matter how young she is. Girls need to be aware that it is perfectly normal for periods to start at any time between 10 and 15 years and sometimes as young as 8. (Also, do not forget boys who may have their own concerns and are often left out of these particular discussions.)

**For more information, visit  
Family Planning Association**



## question

# 7

Children feel anxious when friends develop at different times. This is when a child needs an understanding grown-up to help them.

- ‘ Everyone’s body develops in its own time. Have you noticed any changes in your body that you want to talk about? ’
- ‘ It could be any time from now on. It will almost certainly be before you are 16. It tends to be the same in families and I started when I was around 14, so you might be the same age too. ’



**'What's a  
condom?'**


**asks your  
7-year-old.**

Children at school may have heard their classmates talk about condoms as a joke. As with other questions, it can be helpful to get an idea of what lies behind it, by asking your child where they have heard about condoms. You do not need to go into a very detailed explanation as if you were a sexual health nurse, but a willingness to be open is helpful.

## question

# 8

- “ If you’re going to have sex with someone, you use something called a condom. If the man wears a condom, it can protect against catching infections as well as helping to avoid having a baby. ”
- “ A condom helps to stop the man’s sperm and the woman’s eggs from getting together to make a baby. It’s a special cover for a man’s penis, which catches the sperm. It feels rubbery – a bit like a balloon! I’ll show you one. ”



**'Why do some people get married and other people do not?'**

**asks your 9-year-old daughter.**

There are many different kinds of family structures. Your child will experience many of these differences through their classmates at school. This may trigger a curiosity about these differences as your child compares them to himself or herself.

On the other hand, you may find yourself doing the same as your own views about relationships and marriage are challenged!

**For more information, visit Relationships Scotland**

## question

# 9

- ‘ There is no law that says everyone must get married, but a lot of people want to because they feel that a wedding makes being a couple more special. Some of our friends are married and some are not. People who are not married love each other just the same as people who are. ’
- ‘ Mostly it’s just a choice. Different people think different things. If people are religious, they may think it’s important. ’

**'What does having an abortion mean?'**

## **asks your 10-year-old.**

This is not usually the kind of question a younger child will ask. However, an older child may hear the issue discussed on TV, radio or other media – and pick up on the controversial nature of this for some people.

You need to be clear about this issue from your own moral and faith perspective – you can do this without any complicated details. You might find it useful to discuss your answer with health or school-based staff.

**For more information, visit  
Sexual Health Scotland**

## question

# 10

- “ If a woman is pregnant there can be reasons why she can't have the baby. This would mean that she would have something called an abortion. ”
- “ Occasionally being pregnant will make the woman ill or the baby growing inside the woman is very ill, so the woman will go to hospital to end the pregnancy. This is known as an abortion. ”
- “ Having an abortion means not continuing with the pregnancy. We don't agree with abortions because we think that once a woman is pregnant, she should continue with the pregnancy. ”

## **Your 8-year-old is surfing the internet and says to you:**

**'Check this picture out, we're rating if Emma is 'hot or not?''**

This might be an innocent comment; or it could involve bullying, which could be damaging to the person involved. There are plenty of examples in the media of how quickly comments can go viral and negatively affect people, especially children.

**For more information, visit  
childline**



## question

# 11

The internet can be a brilliant, fun place to explore if used safely. If your child uses the internet and social networking sites, it is important to keep talking to them about it to ensure that they are using them for the right reasons and in a safe way.

- “ Does Emma know this is on the internet? You might want to think about how you would feel if this were you. Remember never to put something on the internet about someone that you wouldn't say to their face. ”
- “ I'm not sure you can judge from a picture; it's personality that makes someone attractive. What else have you been posting? ”

## Your 5-year-old asks:



**'Why are you  
and Mummy not  
getting along?'**

No relationship is perfect; everyone argues or disagrees with each other at some point. It is important to reassure your child that it isn't their fault and that you both love them very much. You should try to be as honest as you can about why you and your partner are not getting along.

**For more information, visit  
Relationships Scotland**

## question

# 12

- “ Your Dad and I are just disagreeing with each other over a silly little thing, we will kiss and make up soon and then we all go to the park together, would you like that? ”
- “ Mummy and I are going to live apart for a while so we can get along better but we still have two things we both agree on, which are that you are a wee smasher and we both love you. ”

# Where can I get more information and support?

## General parenting support:

Parent Network Scotland: **0141 948 0022**,  
**[www.parentnetworkscotland.org.uk](http://www.parentnetworkscotland.org.uk)**

Parentline Scotland: **0800 028 2233**,  
**[www.children1st.org.uk/services/46/parentline-scotland](http://www.children1st.org.uk/services/46/parentline-scotland)**

Parenting Across Scotland:  
**[www.parentingacrossscotland.org/info-for-families.aspx](http://www.parentingacrossscotland.org/info-for-families.aspx)**

Parentzone:  
**[www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk](http://www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk)**

**For parents and carers of children  
with learning disabilities:**

Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability:  
**0141 559 5720, [www.sclld.org.uk](http://www.sclld.org.uk)**

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## Also available:

