

# Becoming an Askable Adult



*Options for Sexual Health (OPT) offers interactive courses for parents and other adults who want to improve the knowledge and skills they need to be approachable, non-judgmental sources of reliable sexual health information for their children and other young people, and guides who can help them confirm their values, sexual self-image, and decision making abilities as they mature.*

*This handout summarizes the approach we take to helping caregivers become Askable Adults for their children, and potentially others.*

## Why is Sexuality Education Important?

Sexuality is broader than sexual activity. It encompasses all the things that define us as girls and boys, and men and women, and everything in between. Shaped by culture, history, values, education and experience, our sexuality influences our views of individuality, family, parenthood and community.

From a young age, children are exposed to sexual imagery and language in their environment, and their bodies are experiencing and developing sexual responsiveness. Their curiosity is inevitable, and the answers they get should clarify—not confuse—the issues for them.

Adolescence is a particularly stressful and confusing time as both physical and cognitive aspects of sexual expression begin to align, and the opportunities for personal decision making expand. Sexuality begins to be a significant part of relationship experiences. We want those relationships to be healthy and safe, as they are the training ground for life as an adult.

## Who is an Askable Adult?

An Askable Adult is someone who is approachable, who listens, and who respects the confidentiality of the young person. The Askable Adult is clear about facts and willing to look for accurate information. Having a sense of humour is helpful; so is sharing feelings. Part of being Askable is to recognize that teaching involves verbal and nonverbal communication, and that your child will learn not only from what you say, but also how you behave and react to situations.

There are a few things you need to address with yourself before you can be an effective Askable Adult.



# How Did You Learn About Sexuality?

How we learned about sexuality influences how we want our children to learn about it. By thinking about the quality and nature of your experiences as a child and youth, you may find it easier to script your responses to your children's questions, and open opportunities to discuss sexuality issues with them. It may help to ask yourself questions like:

- What would I like to have known or been able to ask, and when?
- Was there anything I wish my parents had done, or wish they had said to me?
- What is one message I want to be sure to give my children about sexuality?
- Do I know enough facts to have the conversation?
- Where can I get reliable facts for both of us?



## What Are Your Values and Where Are the Limits of Your Comfort Zone?

Parents are in the unique position of being able to link information and personal values for their children. So, it is critically important for you to be very clear within yourself what you believe and what values are held in your family. It's okay to say that other families might think differently but in *your* family, certain values are important. The goal is to be encouraging and positive about what you regard as appropriate behaviour without making your child feel guilty for questioning or expressing a different point of view.

It is also vital to know where the boundaries are for you. Are there areas where you might hold one view about things in general, but an opposite view when your own child is involved? What are the topics that make you edgy and uncomfortable when they come up? As an Askable Adult you will need to be prepared to do two things in those situations: acknowledge the difficulty you have with the topic, and offer your child the opportunity to discuss the subject with someone whom you know is more comfortable and suitably knowledgeable. Give thought to whom else in the family or your circle of friends may be willing to fill the role of being another trusted Askable Adult in your child's life. In fact, it's not uncommon for one parent in the neighbourhood to be the "go to" adult for young people who have difficulty talking with their own parents.



## Remember—Help is Available

Being an Askable Adult is no guarantee that you won't encounter a situation or question that really stumps or unnerves you. 1-800 SEX SENSE is a good place to start. Staffed by nurses and sexual health educators, this phone line is open Mon-Fri 9am-9pm and can offer you reliable information, and a wealth of referrals to other resources and helpful people. You might also want to check out OPT's web site ([www.optionsforsexualhealth.com](http://www.optionsforsexualhealth.com)) or [www.sexualityandu.ca](http://www.sexualityandu.ca), a web site of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada.



# You Can Be Confident About Your Role as an Askable Parent

While 43% of parents don't see themselves this way, they are in fact the preferred and primary source that 63% of young people want to go for information about their sexuality (King et al, 1988; McKay and Holowaty, 1997; Canadian Association of Adolescent Health). So you already have a head start! To add to your confidence, it may help to think through the main concerns parents have expressed about discussing sexuality:

- *“The more my child knows about sex the more likely he/she will experiment with it.”* Consider the quality of decisions that will be made with a strong knowledge base as opposed to those based on ignorance. Young people have a range of choices



—including not being sexually active.

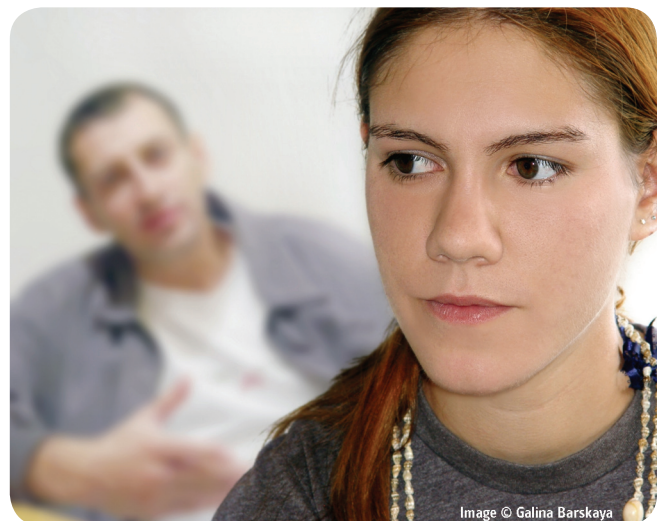
- *“I have to know everything before I can teach my children.”* You don't, for several reasons. There are a lot of good resources for both of you to use as supplements to your conversations. Finding answers together can be a great opportunity to model where to find reliable information. And keep this in mind: the relationship with one's parents is the strongest associative factor influencing sexual behaviour, especially among younger youth. (Canadian Youth, Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Study; Council of Ministers of Education, 2003). Learning to discuss

difficult issues together can be an important bonding experience for you and your child.

- *“I'm afraid I'll tell my child too much.”* It's important to assess the type of question you are being asked. Is it a request for information, a request for permission, or a check-in for normalcy? Is it a shock question to test your reaction, your approachability, or trustworthiness? Is it a plea for help? If you are initiating the conversation, you need to know how to gauge what is appropriate for the age of your child. Meg Hickling, one of Canada's most trusted sexual health educators, has produced excellent resources for parents on having age-appropriate conversations—see our website for more details.

In all your conversations about sexuality, we encourage you to strive to include six components:

- The facts
- The family values around these facts
- An invitation to the young person to say what he/she thinks about the meaning of a question or a situation
- The potential consequences associated with acting on the information being provided and appropriate behaviours based on the information
- Any additional information or experience that is also important in understanding the facts





# There Are Some Rules

We highly recommend that you follow a few rules for being an effective Askable Adult.

1. **Use correct vocabulary.** By doing so you will normalize the conversation about sexuality and enhance the clarity of what you and your child discuss. It's easier with the correct terms to talk about private body parts and their function, and private and public behaviour.
2. **Keep your child's confidences.** You want your child to come to you, so trust in the relationship you have is critical.
3. **Keep your cool.** Listen to the whole story before you "freak". You want your child to be able to tell you about any incident that has been troubling or uncomfortable, and you can help your child by avoiding getting angry or upset yourself in the course of your conversation. It's important to deliver the message: "Talk to me if you need me. I promise I won't get mad."
4. **Repeat yourself.** Repeating your information and messages serves several purposes. It helps to create normalcy around the subject of sexuality. It opens the door for clarification and more questions. And, it reinforces your commitment to supporting and encouraging your child.



## Take a Test Drive

Below we have included three situations for you to consider and discuss with your spouse or a friend. For more situations to explore go to [www.optionsforsexualhealth.org/education/askable-adult](http://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org/education/askable-adult). We also encourage you to try out your response with our expert staff on the 1-800 SEX SENSE line.

One other idea: try each situation out a second time, but reverse the gender of the young person(s) involved, and consider what changes occur in your attitude and approach.

Your six year old has come home from school quite upset. In a conversation with a classmate he has been told that babies are born out of a hole a doctor cuts in the mother's tummy.

You have a strong intuition that your 14 year old son and his 13 year old girlfriend have started to have sex, but you're getting nowhere opening a discussion with him about the matter.

After a difficult preamble your 12 year old son has confided in you that he thinks he might be gay. He is confused and ill at ease because the prevailing attitude among his friends is very homophobic.

You have a great relationship with your 16 year old daughter, so she is comfortable coming to you with the news that she and her boyfriend are going to start a sexual relationship. She wants your advice on how to be a good lover.

**[www.optionsforsexualhealth.org](http://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org) \* 1-800 SEX SENSE**