



**Travel** Why Israel should be on your wish list  
Plus How to talk to your child about sex

# Weekend

Travel Starts on page 39



Pack your picnic!

20 beautiful bank holiday walks

### Easter wine guide



Jane MacQuitty's top 12 bottles

### Chocolate baking



The chefs' cake and tart guide

### Get in the garden



Your jobs for the long weekend



## 10 Body + Soul

## How to talk to your child about

Sexting, porn, consent and social media — it's not just a chat about the birds and the bees. Sex education in 2021 is a minefield for parents. [Anna Maxted](#) reports

**F**orget the birds and the bees. For parents in 2021, sex education involves conversations not just about sex itself, but about subjects such as social media, porn and consent. Even the most modern clueless-up parents might be forgiven for feeling slightly out of their depth — but burying your head in the sand isn't an option. Nor is reading them your well-thumbed copy of *Mummy Laid an Egg* and hoping for the best. Sex education now is about a continuing conversation between you and your child that starts young and through which hopefully they will learn a positive attitude to their bodies and their relationships. Research shows that children really do want to hear what their parents have to say. Here we ask the experts how best to talk to your child.

**They might roll their eyes but kids really want you to talk to them about sex**

"Children want reliable adults to talk to," says Lucy Emmerson, the director of the Sex Education Forum, a charity that works with organisations such as schools to help to provide quality sex and relationship education for children and young people. "Their preference isn't to get answers from media and friends." Unfortunately, that's often where they are getting their information from, according to a NATSAL (National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles) study, which found that 24 per cent of those aged 15 to 24 got their main information about sex from their mates.

Twenty-three per cent of boys say they

want their father to be their main source of information about sex when they're growing up," says Lucy Emmerson. "Yet only 3 per cent are getting that, so there's a big gap. Forty per cent of girls would like their mother to be their main source of information about sex. In reality, 14 per cent are getting that."

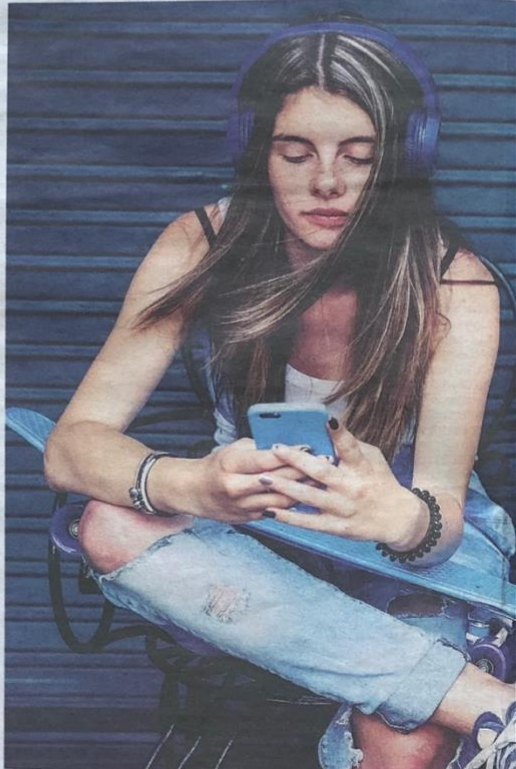
Also, boys are missing out, and it matters. Typically, she says, mothers undertake the bulk of sex education and they often talk more to daughters than sons. "Boys are being done a disservice." If we want them to be responsible, we must include them, or "it sets in motion this pattern of giving girls more information and potentially more than half the burden of responsibility for staying safe, or managing contraception, or managing the situation". The conversation, Emmerson says, "needs to be equal but differentiated. They will have slightly different questions because of gender roles in society and different bodies".

**The conversation starts when they are tiny and doesn't stop**

Sex education is a process that starts from the beginning of a child's life as we educate them about their bodies. It isn't about having one talk at a milestone moment, Emmerson says.

"It's a constant part of being. It should be integrated into daily life so parents are responding to children's natural curiosity about their bodies; finding names for body parts; helping them to understand, articulate and manage their feelings and recognise feelings in other people; giving them autonomy around consent — learning you must respect other people's wishes in terms of touch."

“Young children should be armed with a vocabulary to describe their body”



# sex: expert guide for parents



BETTY BRAGG

Sex and sexuality is about showing love, care and feelings towards each other. It's not just an animalistic act. Make sure they know that sex should be pleasurable for both parties — porn doesn't always show women enjoying the process.

## How to make sure they really understand what consent is

The conversation about consent should start at a young age. Talk to your 12, 13 and 14-year-olds, says Dr Elizabeth Schroeder, an award-winning sex education expert and a co-founding editor of the *American Journal of Sexuality Education*. "Tell them that when you're in a relationship with someone you can never pressure them to do something they don't want to do. When they say no the first time, you back off immediately." She adds: "This is the time when they're really concrete thinkers so you have to spell it out for them, otherwise they don't get it."

The cup of tea analogy is clear and helpful. There is an excellent animation online for anyone struggling to understand consent. You are asked to imagine a scenario where instead of initiating sex, you're making someone a cup of tea. If you ask someone if they would like a cup of tea, the answers that aren't a straightforward yes or no can be anything from "I'm not sure" to "not now" or "I'll let you know when I do". A person can change their mind when they are presented with the cup or after they've taken a sip. There's no circumstance under which you'd dream of trying to make them drink it.

Keep talking to your children as they get older, Schroeder says, emphasising that "when you're not sure if you have someone's consent, you have to ask. If you don't, you could end up hurting someone — and breaking the law."

Schroeder suggests reminding teenagers that we should constantly be renegotiating and checking in. "I know we've done this together sexually — are you still OK with that?" We too can't afford to be coy. "It's always a fine line between respecting privacy and being parents," she says. "There are times when we have to go barrelling over that line."

## A lot of teenage girls are now scared by the thought of sex

It's hardly surprising today, with stories of upskirting, revenge porn and coercion, that so many teenage girls seem frightened by the thought of sex. But, Shahnnavaz says, there is a lot that parents can do to mitigate this. She advises that mothers reassure girls: "There are really nice boys out there, and they don't do that."

To help girls to reclaim their sexuality, Shahnnavaz says, we should emphasise that it is something enjoyable for both people. Mothers, she says, should "be more open and talk about sex and sexuality, and what might be pleasurable and what might not be, what a girl can expect and demand from the boy, and that it has to be about her own pleasure as well as giving pleasure."

She says: "I often say to girls I work with, 'Make sure you are enjoying it. You're not doing someone a favour'. If you feel empowered and in control of your

body, and you know what you do and don't want, there's no reason to be fearful."

## Talk to them about sexting (including the legalities surrounding it) by the age of 12

Sexting is new territory for our generation. Shahnnavaz says: "It's a very normal, common thing for teenagers in relationships — even in relationships that haven't even started. They do send images of themselves."

Freaking out doesn't help. "Saying, 'That's awful, don't do that, isn't going to stop them. I say to teenagers, 'If you want to send images of yourself, make sure your face isn't on it. Because if you do break up, your photo could be circulated.' It's part of the courtship and flirtation and quite normal. But you need to give ways for them to be safe — so their face isn't shown, they don't show too many of their private parts."

Shahnnavaz says that she advises teenagers that if they are to send flirtatious photos, to wear underwear.

It's important too to let teenagers know the law on sexting. And that conversation should start when they're 11 or 12. Childline's website, [childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk), explains the law clearly. If you're under 18 it's illegal to send nudes or sexual videos of yourself to anyone else. It's also illegal for anyone to save or share a nude or sexual video of you (and you can also get into trouble for threatening to share a nude), even if it's a selfie, and they're under 18 too. Although it's unlikely the police would prosecute either of you if you're both under 18 and in a relationship.

## Parents don't talk enough to boys about puberty

We talk to girls about periods, puberty and pregnancy, Emmerson says. "There's a lot of attention on girls' bodies and their changing bodies and their bodily needs but not much around boys' bodies. There are wet dreams, there's hair, there's changing body shape and voice. But are we talking to boys about their bodily changes, how their bodies feel? The risk is you're giving boys the message, 'No you can't come and talk about your feelings, we're not expecting to hear what they are, we can't respond to them.'"

Pubescent children will have questions and you need to be approachable and proactive. Shahnnavaz says: "A young boy who has morning wetness in the bed, and his father hasn't spoken to him about it, may get scared." But, she says: "If the father had spoken to him about it, very casually, he wouldn't have been frightened. He'd have been, 'OK, I'm growing up.' Parents must, she says, "talk about all of these things to normalise them."

## Don't forget to remind them that sex is something to enjoy!

"One thing young people tell us is sorely missing from sex education is discussion about pleasure," Emmerson says. So perhaps the most important thing you can do as a parent is to spell out that sex can be wonderful. "Not can be," Shahnnavaz says. "Should be."

## Don't be prissy: use the correct anatomical terms even with three-year-olds

"We expect boys and girls to understand and respect each others' bodies but we haven't even equipped them to name these parts," Emmerson says.

Children name the world around them, she explains. But if, when they ask for a word for their genitals, "they're not given any words at all, that creates a feeling of taboo. Or they're only given a euphemism. And then other aspects of sex and relationships may be clothed in euphemisms." In fact, she says, "when they start infant school they should be armed with vocabulary to describe their body. Giving children words that everybody will understand safeguards your children and empowers them to talk about their bodies and each other's."

If a child can use terms like "my vulva" and "my vagina" correctly, you can better explain boundaries — the idea that "your body belongs to you, and other people's bodies belong to them". It means as teenagers "they're better able to prepare for intimate relationships", Emmerson says.

## Talk to them about porn before they see it

In a report commissioned by the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification) more than half (51 per cent) of 11 to 13-year-olds had seen pornography. As a parent you need to make sure you have had a proper conversation about sex before then. "Do speak to your child about porn by the age of 11," says Dr Shadi Shahnnavaz, the head of family therapy at the Soke health clinic. Don't wait until they have their first smartphone or are shown porn by a friend. "All it takes is for them to go to a friend who has an older brother."

It's not simply one graphic conversation. "If you've started at an early age to talk about bodies, the right touch, what's OK and what's not, they are already prepared," Emmerson says. "If they go to a friend's house and watch porn, they might feel scared and guilty. But they'll also feel comfortable enough to tell you. It becomes a natural thing to talk about. They know you won't judge them or jump down their throat. Then you can say, 'That's not what sex is about.'"

Make sure that adolescents know that what they see in porn is not sex, Shahnnavaz says. Explain that "porn is not normal sex

“Sexting is normal in relationships. But you have to tell them how to be safe”