

# **OH NO! WHAT DO I DO NOW?**

**Messages About Sexuality:  
How to Give Yours to Your Child**

**A SIECUS PUBLICATION**

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## **TO PROGRAM DIRECTORS:**

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This booklet was developed as part of a joint SIECUS/CHOICE project conducted in 1980-81 for parents of young children and based on the premise that parents are the primary sexuality educators of their children.

At the outset, it was found that the programs and curricula being reviewed for possible use focused primarily on increasing parents' factual knowledge of sexuality. In the project's initial work with parents, however, it became apparent that many participants were already reasonably knowledgeable about sexuality but were nevertheless still uncomfortable discussing sexuality issues with their own children. Therefore, since such discomfort obviously works against the effectiveness of parents in their role as sexuality educators, the project directors designed a workshop approach which focuses on a step-by-step process aimed at eliminating this stress. The central feature of this process—in which parents learn how to determine in advance what messages about sexuality they want to give their children—proved to be highly successful in significantly increasing the parents' comfort level.

Because this process is based on helping each *individual participant* identify the specific messages s/he wants to give, it also proved effective in assuring that the entire spectrum of parents' values and attitudes within the various cultural and religious backgrounds was fully respected, and it can therefore be used with all sorts of parent groups.

The material in this booklet was developed as a framework for implementing this process. In presenting each of the eight hypothetical (but representative) "Oh, no! What do I do now?" situations, the program directors led the parents through a patterned approach which, while obviously providing them with factual information, was of greater significance in teaching them how to analyze their own attitudes and feelings about sexuality concerns and formulate their own responses, and how to become more relaxed in their discussions.

It is important to point out that this material was originally produced as eight individual worksheets and, since each one was utilized separately, for practical reasons the step-by-step outline was repeated on each sheet. But it gradually became apparent that the repetition actually enhanced the process for the parents since they appreciated the constant emphasis on form, and the "tip sheets" (as they were nicknamed) became a popular program resource. Now in booklet form, they will be helpful to parents both during and after participation in a sexuality education program.

**Susan Afriat, CHOICE  
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## **INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS**

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Our sexuality is reflected in our entire being, not solely in what we do with our genitals. It includes all those things in a person's life that relate specifically to being a boy or a girl, a woman or a man. It is affected not only by our biological makeup and our psychological development, but also by our cultural and religious backgrounds.

Throughout our lives, all of us receive both verbal and nonverbal messages about sexuality from many sources, but the messages parents give their children *in the formative years* are most significant and have a lasting impact. It is therefore vital that open and positive communication between parent and child begin as early as possible—setting a pattern for effective future discussions during adolescence and young adulthood. In such communication, even more important for parents than a knowledge of all the basic facts about sexuality is their ability to discuss them *comfortably* and therefore more effectively with their children. But traditionally most parents feel very uncomfortable talking about "sex."

One way of generating a more relaxed approach is for parents to decide in advance just what messages about sexuality they want to give their children and then to practice responses to anticipated questions and behavior. And achieving this comfortable approach is what this booklet is all about.

**A Child's Point of View:** To begin with, when determining how to respond to children's behaviors and questions, we need to understand that small children perceive, understand, and experience their world in a different way than adults. They generally have a very literal understanding of things and have difficulty comprehending abstract concepts. For example, when a child is told that a baby grows in the mother's "tummy," s/he may believe that the baby is mixed in with the food in her stomach.

In their efforts to learn and grow, young children constantly repeat activities and questions. Therefore, in the early years, well before the hormonal changes of puberty affect children's thoughts and feelings about sexuality and before parents' concerns become focused on the reproductive aspects of their children's sexuality, parents have the opportunity to give their child an understanding of the broad role sexuality plays in our lives. As they do so, a comfortable pattern of communication will be established between parent and child—one which can extend into the teen years. And that broader view will assist the child in developing the self-respect and sense of responsibility that are so important as s/he grows older.

**Messages:** Throughout this booklet the term "messages" is used to convey the idea that what we say and how we say it and what we don't say result in messages that reflect our values and attitudes and are at the core of our communication about sexuality. For example, even if we do not respond verbally to a situation, our facial expression can give a strong "message." In addition, there are messages about sexuality all around us: in our social groups, and in song lyrics, television, advertising, etc.

When parents have decided ahead of time on what messages they want to give, they can then better convey those messages in their response to children's behaviors and questions. Parents often respond to sexuality issues emotionally and may later regret the messages that resulted. Those "automatic" emotional responses often convey the same negative messages their parents gave them in their youth. By thinking ahead and taking the time to consider the underlying message you are giving, you will find that your response is easier to make, that it represents what you want to say, and that you can therefore feel positive about how you handled that particular situation.

**Parents Together:** There are many types of families and individuals involved in parenting. Whether yours is a family of Mother, Father, and children, or some other set of persons, we believe that it is very important for those

of you engaged in primary parenting to talk together about the messages you plan to give your children.

**Other People:** Interaction with other people often challenges your convictions regarding how you have decided to raise your children. You may find that relatives have strong feelings about sexuality issues and about the messages that children should be given—feelings which are quite different and/or perhaps even at odds with your own. This is most difficult when it is a close relative. It may also become an issue with neighbors and friends, particularly if they are occasionally in a supervisory role with your children or you with their children. Your having clearly decided on the messages you want to give your children provides you with the strength and confidence necessary to respond with conviction to concerned friends and relatives.

**Questions and Behaviors:** Since parent/child communication regarding sexuality issues is generally initiated by the child's *questions and behaviors*, this booklet has been organized around these two categories and in the following pages it presents an analysis of five common behaviors and three often-asked questions. These have been selected because they have proven to be the most typical examples. Obviously they are not the only ones wherein parents give messages about sexuality, but in working through these examples you will begin to establish a way of responding that is consistent with your own values. And in the discussion of the concepts involved, you will find yourself able to apply them to other situations appropriate for generating communication with your children about sexuality.

**The Process:** With each of the following examples of typical behaviors and questions related to sexuality, a step-by-step process is presented to assist you in determining a response which presents the message and/or information you decide to give. In regard to behaviors, the steps include: (1) thinking about why the child is behaving this way (from his/her point of view); (2) deciding what messages you want to give in regard to the behavior; and (3) determining what verbal response will best represent that message. With the questions, the steps include: (1) finding out what the child is *really* asking; (2) deciding what information to give; and (3) selecting the most appropriate verbal response.

The repetition of the outline for this step-by-step process in each example may at first seem overdone, but our experience with this format has shown that this constant emphasis on *form* is an important part of this approach to helping you become more comfortable in talking to your children about sexuality concerns.

## ***LISTEN TO THAT!***

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Your four-year-old son spills his milk and mumbles, "Oh, shit!"  
Your four-year-old daughter exclaims, "Damn, damn, damn!" when she can't put her puzzle together.  
Your five-year-old screams, "Fuck you!" when his friend won't share a toy.

### **ASK YOURSELF: WHY ARE THEY USING THOSE WORDS?**

They may be *imitating* adults.  
They may be trying to get your *attention*.  
It may make them feel *grown up*.  
They may think it's *cute* because of how others have reacted in the past.  
Boys, especially, may use these words instead of crying—*controlling their emotions*.

### **YOU SAY TO YOURSELF: WHAT DO I DO NOW?**

You may be *feeling* shocked, embarrassed, hurt, sad, angry, confused. (It's natural to feel any of these emotions.) What messages do you want to give? What do you want your child to learn? Remember, by thinking ahead about what messages you want to give, even before the situation arises, you are more likely to come up with a response which effectively reflects these messages.

#### **The following are examples of messages:**

- It's bad to use those words.
- Those words should not be used in front of parents.
- Other people may get angry if you use those words.
- It's not acceptable to use that kind of language.

YOU MAY NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH ANY OF THESE EXAMPLES. THE POINT IS TO DECIDE WHAT MESSAGE YOU WANT TO GIVE BEFORE YOU RESPOND. THEN YOUR RESPONSE WILL NOT ONLY BE EASIER TO MAKE BUT WILL ALSO BE CONSISTENT WITH YOUR MESSAGE, AND YOU WILL FEEL POSITIVE ABOUT HOW YOU HANDLED THE SITUATION.

### **REMEMBER:**

Children need alternative words to express their emotions.  
Children will repeat what they hear adults say.  
If an adult laughs and thinks it's cute when a child uses a "dirty" word, the child will keep on using it.  
If the child gets a strong reaction from an adult, s/he is more likely to continue using the word.

### **NOW, ASK YOURSELF: WHAT RESPONSE WILL GIVE THE MESSAGE I WANT TO GIVE?**

Below are a few examples of responses. Decide on a response that gets your message across and teaches the children what you want them to learn.

#### **Response:**

1. "If you say that word again, I'll wash your mouth out with soap!"  
**Message:** *The child is bad and will be punished next time.*
2. "Do you know what that word means?"  
**Message:** *Parent teaches child something new.*
3. "You sound angry. That's okay, but I'd like you to choose some other words to use when you're angry."  
**Message:** *Acknowledges child's feelings and gives an alternative.*
4. "I don't like that word and I don't want you to use it."  
**Message:** *Tells child what the parent's limits are and the child learns appropriate behavior.*
5. Laughter, or indicating that the language is cute, funny, etc.  
**Message:** *Encourages the child to repeat the words.*
6. Ignore it.  
**Message:** *The child doesn't learn anything and may or may not continue using the words. Even if you don't respond verbally, your attitude itself conveys a message.*

#### **Notes:**

## **LOOK AT THAT! WHAT ARE THEY DOING?**

You walk into your son's bedroom and find him being examined by his friend Tammy. He has his clothes off and she is listening to his heart with a toy stethoscope.

### **ASK YOURSELF: WHY ARE THEY DOING THAT?**

They may be *curious* about each other's body.  
They may be *imitating* what happens in the doctor's office.  
They may be *imitating* what they've seen on television.

### **YOU SAY TO YOURSELF: WHAT DO I DO NOW?**

You may be *feeling*: surprised, upset, shocked, amused, angry, uncomfortable. (It's natural to feel any of these emotions.) What messages do you want to give about what they are doing? What do you want them to learn? Remember, by thinking ahead about what messages you want to give, even before the situation arises, you are more likely to come up with a response which effectively reflects these messages.

#### **The following are examples of messages:**

- It's wrong to touch someone else's body.
- Bodies are private.
- Only doctors should do that.
- It's all right to be curious.
- It's wrong to play without your clothes on.

YOU MAY NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH ANY OF THESE EXAMPLES. THE POINT IS TO DECIDE WHAT MESSAGES YOU WANT TO GIVE BEFORE YOU RESPOND. THEN YOUR RESPONSE WILL NOT ONLY BE EASIER TO MAKE BUT WILL ALSO BE CONSISTENT WITH YOUR MESSAGE, AND YOU WILL FEEL POSITIVE ABOUT HOW YOU HANDLED THE SITUATION.

#### **REMEMBER:**

Curiosity about bodies is normal. Children are curious about both sexes.

## **NOW ASK YOURSELF: WHAT RESPONSE WILL GIVE THE MESSAGE THAT I WANT TO GIVE?**

Below are a few examples of responses. Decide on a response that gets your message across and teaches the children what you want them to learn.

#### **Response:**

1. "Put your clothes on right now! I never want to see this again!"  
**Message:** *The children are bad, but they may decide to repeat the behavior where the parents will not see it.*
2. "Tammy, put your clothes on and go home right now!"  
**Message:** *Tammy is bad and it's her fault.*
3. "It's okay to be curious about each other. Put your clothes on and I will show you some pictures of other bodies."  
**Message:** *Curiosity is okay, and the parent will make sure their questions are answered.*
4. "I don't want you touching each other's body. Bodies are private and I'd like you to keep your clothes on when you play."  
**Message:** *Nudity and touching are private and the parent is letting the children know the limits of their play.*
5. Ignore them.  
**Message:** *Children don't learn anything. They may or may not continue playing in this way. Even if you don't respond verbally, your attitude itself conveys a message.*

(A similar type of situation arises if you find your daughter and your neighbor's son, both four years old, undressed and trying to imitate intercourse. Most of the messages and responses given above are examples which also can be applied here.)

#### **Notes:**

## **LOOK AT THAT! WHAT ARE THEY DOING?**

You walk into your five-year-old son's bedroom and find him and his friend Johnny with their pants off. They are looking at and touching each other's penis.

### **ASK YOURSELF: WHY ARE THEY DOING THAT?**

They may be *curious* about how the other one looks. They may be *comparing* to see if there is any difference. They may be touching each other because it *feels good*.

### **YOU SAY TO YOURSELF: WHAT DO I DO NOW?**

You may be *feeling*: angry, uncomfortable, surprised, shocked, confused, scared. (It's natural to feel any of these emotions.) What messages do you want to give them about what they are doing? What do you want them to learn? Remember, by thinking ahead about what messages you want to give, even before the situation arises, you are more likely to come up with a response which effectively reflects these messages.

#### **The following are examples of messages:**

- It's wrong to touch someone else's penis.
- Bodies are private.
- It's bad to take off your clothes.
- It's all right to be curious.

YOU MAY NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH ANY OF THESE EXAMPLES. THE POINT IS TO DECIDE WHAT MESSAGE YOU WANT TO GIVE BEFORE YOU RESPOND. THEN YOUR RESPONSE WILL NOT ONLY BE EASIER TO MAKE BUT WILL ALSO BE CONSISTENT WITH YOUR MESSAGE, AND YOU WILL FEEL POSITIVE ABOUT HOW YOU HANDLED THE SITUATION.

#### **REMEMBER:**

Curiosity may extend to touching.  
Curiosity about bodies is normal. Children are curious about both sexes.

## **NOW, ASK YOURSELF: WHAT RESPONSE WILL GIVE THE MESSAGE THAT I WANT TO GIVE?**

Below are a few examples of responses. Decide on a response that gets your message across and teaches the children what you want them to learn.

#### **Response:**

1. "Put your clothes on right away. I never want to see this again."

**Message:** *The children are bad. But they may decide to repeat the behavior where the parent will not see it.*

2. "Johnny, put your clothes on and go home right now."

**Message:** *Johnny is bad and it's his fault.*

3. "It's okay to be curious about each other. Put on your clothes and I will show you some pictures of other bodies."

**Message:** *Curiosity is okay, and you will make sure their questions are answered.*

4. "I don't want you touching each other's penis. Bodies are private and I'd like you to keep your clothes on when you play."

**Message:** *Nudity and touching are private and parent is letting children know the limits of their play.*

5. Ignore them.

**Message:** *They don't learn anything. They may or may not continue playing this way. Even if you don't respond verbally, your attitude itself conveys a message.*

#### **Notes:**

## **LOOK AT THAT! WHAT IS S/HE DOING?**

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You notice your five-year-old daughter rubbing her vagina (vulva) while watching television right before bedtime (or your five-year-old son pulling on his penis).

### **ASK YOURSELF: WHY IS S/HE DOING THAT?**

S/he may do it because it *feels good*.  
S/he may do it because it is *comforting or relaxing*.  
S/he may do it because it reduces *anxiety or tension*.  
S/he may be responding to a pleasant fantasy.

### **YOU SAY TO YOURSELF: WHAT DO I DO NOW?**

You may be *feeling*: angry, uncomfortable, surprised, shocked, confused, amused. (It's natural to feel any of these emotions.) What messages do you want to give about what s/he is doing? What do you want your child to learn? Remember, by thinking ahead about what messages you want to give, even before the situation arises, you are more likely to come up with a response which effectively reflects these messages.

#### **The following are examples of messages:**

- It's wrong to touch your vagina (vulva) or penis.
- Masturbation will hurt you.
- Masturbation is dirty.
- Masturbation is okay but should be done in private.
- Masturbation is part of normal development.

YOU MAY NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH ANY OF THESE EXAMPLES. THE POINT IS TO DECIDE WHAT MESSAGES YOU WANT TO GIVE BEFORE YOU RESPOND. THEN YOUR RESPONSE WILL NOT ONLY BE EASIER TO MAKE BUT WILL ALSO BE CONSISTENT WITH YOUR MESSAGE, AND YOU WILL FEEL POSITIVE ABOUT HOW YOU HANDLED THE SITUATION.

#### **REMEMBER:**

Self-stimulation is a part of normal development.  
Both males and females touch and stimulate themselves from an early age.

Children will stop when they become uncomfortable or physically irritated.

When children masturbate to the exclusion of all other activities, this may indicate that they are experiencing stress or anxiety in other areas of their life.

Many parents who feel that it is important to teach their children the difference between private and public behavior use self-stimulation as an example of "private."

### **NOW ASK YOURSELF: WHAT RESPONSE WILL GIVE THE MESSAGE THAT I WANT TO GIVE?**

Below are a few examples of responses. Decide on a response that gets your message across and teaches the children what you want them to learn.

#### **Response:**

1. "Take your hand away and don't ever touch down there!"  
**Message:** *It's wrong to touch your vagina (vulva) or penis.*
2. "Stop that! You'll go crazy!"  
**Message:** *Masturbation will hurt you.*
3. "Stop that and wash your hands right now!"  
**Message:** *Masturbation is dirty.*
4. Interest the child in another activity.  
**Message:** *Stops the behavior, but child doesn't learn anything.*
5. "I know that feels good but I'd rather you did it in private."  
**Message:** *Masturbation is okay and normal, but it should be done in private.*
6. Ignore the behavior.  
**Message:** *Child does not learn anything. Even if you don't respond verbally, your attitude itself conveys a message.*

#### **Notes:**

## **LOOK AT THAT! WHAT IS HE DOING?**

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You enter your four-year-old son's room and find him changing the diaper on the baby doll belonging to his playmate Mary. He asks: "Will you buy me a baby doll like this?"

### **ASK YOURSELF: WHY IS HE DOING THAT?**

He may have seen it on television.  
He wants something that his friend has.  
It's a different and interesting kind of toy for him. None of the other boys he knows has a doll.  
He has seen adults changing diapers.  
He's having fun playing Daddy.

### **YOU SAY TO YOURSELF: WHAT DO I DO NOW?**

You may be *feeling*: angry, uncomfortable, surprised, shocked, confused, amused. (It's natural to feel any of these emotions.) What messages do you want to give? What do you want your child to learn? Remember, by thinking ahead about what messages you want to give, even before the situation arises, you are more likely to come up with a response which effectively reflects these messages.

#### **The following are examples of messages:**

- Boys who do girls' things aren't normal and may become homosexuals.
- Only girls and women are supposed to take care of babies.
- Playing with different kinds of toys is good because it will develop broader creativity.
- Sex roles should be interchangeable.

YOU MAY NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH ANY OF THESE EXAMPLES, THE POINT IS TO DECIDE WHAT MESSAGES YOU WANT TO GIVE BEFORE YOU RESPOND. THEN YOUR RESPONSE WILL NOT ONLY BE EASIER TO MAKE BUT WILL ALSO BE CONSISTENT WITH YOUR MESSAGE, AND YOU WILL FEEL POSITIVE ABOUT HOW YOU HANDLED THE SITUATION.

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### **NOW ASK YOURSELF: WHAT RESPONSE WILL GIVE THE MESSAGE THAT I WANT TO GIVE?**

Below are a few examples of responses. Decide on a response that gets your message across and teaches the children what you want them to learn.

#### **Response:**

1. "This is a girl's toy. Boys don't play with dolls."  
**Message:** *There are toys that are only for boys and toys that are only for girls.*
2. "It's nice that you like to play Daddy."  
**Message:** *Play is rehearsal for adult behavior. Taking care of a baby is an acceptable adult male behavior.*
3. "I won't buy you a doll but you can play with your friend's doll."  
**Message:** *A mixed message. The child can't have his own doll, but it's okay to play with dolls sometimes.*
4. "It would be okay with me, but your Dad wouldn't let you have it."  
**Message:** *Your mother and father don't always agree on everything. In this situation, Dad is the boss.*
5. "We'll think about it. Why don't you and Mary play with something else now?"  
**Message:** *Playing with a doll is not okay at this time. If Mother really doesn't intend to think about it but would rather ignore it, this will be conveyed through how she gives this response.*

#### **Notes:**

**"WHERE DID I COME FROM?"**

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**The child may be asking:**

- Was I born in a hospital?
- Where (in what city) was I born?
- Am I adopted?
- How did I get out of your body?
- How are babies made?

**STEP ONE: FIND OUT WHAT S/HE IS REALLY ASKING.**

Your response could be:

- Where do you think you came from?
- Do you mean what city or place?
- Do you want to hear the story of how you were born?

**STEP TWO: NOW THAT YOU KNOW WHAT S/HE REALLY WANTS TO KNOW, YOU CAN BEGIN ANSWERING THE QUESTION MORE DIRECTLY.**

Before you answer, think about:

- Your own values and attitudes about birth and reproduction.
- How much factual information you want to give.
- How much factual information your child can understand.

**REMEMBER:**

At this age, children often believe that they have always existed, and they have a hard time understanding that they were not always the way they are right now. They may be asking, "Where was I before I came to live here?"

If the question is about the actual birth process, it's all right to say, "I don't know how I want to answer that question right now. Let me think about it and answer you later." Be sure to really go back and answer it later!

If you really aren't sure how to answer so that your child will understand, you may want to use one of the many books available on the subject. Read the book carefully before you share it with your child, to make sure you are comfortable with the way it presents the information.

A child's curiosity can be used as a guide in providing information. But avoid giving a "lecture." A simple, direct answer in a conversational tone is far more effective.

**STEP THREE: DECIDE ON YOUR RESPONSE.**

**Sample conversation:**

- Child:** Where did I come from?  
**Parent:** Where do you think you came from?  
**Child:** I don't know. My friend Gloria says she knows how babies are made but she won't tell me.  
**Parent:** Well, babies grow in a special place inside their Mommy's body.  
**Child:** How does the baby get in there?  
**Parent:** Mommy and Daddy make the baby from a tiny egg in Mommy's body and a sperm from Daddy's body.

A conversation like this will probably satisfy a young child's curiosity. As the child grows older, s/he may continue asking such questions, and the answers may require more detail.

**Notes:**

YOUR FOUR-YEAR-OLD SON ASKS:

**"CAN I BE A MOMMY WHEN I GROW UP?"**

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He may be asking:

- Can boys have babies?
- Do all adults have babies?
- Can I share in having a baby?
- What do boys/men have to do with having and taking care of babies?

**STEP ONE: FIND OUT WHAT HE REALLY WANTS TO KNOW.**

Your response could be:

- What do you think?
- What brings this question up?
- What do you mean by "be a mommy"?
- You're a boy, and only girls can be mommies. Do you mean can you help take care of your babies when you're a daddy?

**STEP TWO: NOW THAT YOU KNOW WHAT HE IS REALLY ASKING, YOU CAN ANSWER THE QUESTION MORE DIRECTLY.**

Before you answer, think about:

- Your values and attitudes about being a parent.
- How much factual information you want to give.
- How much factual information your child can understand.

**REMEMBER:**

At this age, children often believe that all grown-ups become mommies and daddies, that babies come automatically as part of becoming an adult, that everyone wants to have babies, and that not to have them is unimaginable.

It is important to teach both boys and girls about the anatomy of both sexes, and to explain that there's a special reason why their bodies are different—males can become fathers and females can become mothers.

A child's curiosity can be used as a guide in providing information. But avoid giving a "lecture." A simple, direct answer in a conversational tone is far more effective.

If you really aren't sure how to answer so that your child will understand, you may want to use one of the many books available on the subject. Read the book carefully before you share it with your child, to make sure you are comfortable with the way it presents the information.

**STEP THREE: DECIDE ON YOUR RESPONSE.**

**Sample conversation:**

- Child:** Can I be a mommy when I grow up?  
**Parent:** Would you like to be a mommy when you grow up?  
**Child:** Yes, because I like babies.  
**Parent:** Well, you can be a daddy when you grow up. Boys can be daddies and girls can become mommies. Daddies take care of babies too.

A conversation like this will probably satisfy a young child's curiosity. As the child grows older, s/he may continue asking questions, and the answers may require more detail.

**Notes:**

YOUR FOUR-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER ASKS:

**"WHY DON'T I HAVE A PENIS?"**

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She may be asking:

- What's the difference between boys and girls?
- Is there something wrong with me?
- Did I have a penis and something happened to it?

**STEP ONE: FIND OUT WHAT SHE IS REALLY ASKING.**

Your response could be:

- What do you think?
- Do you know what you do have?
- Are you wondering why girls don't have a penis?
- (Mother) I don't have one either. What brings up this question?

**STEP TWO: NOW THAT YOU KNOW WHAT SHE'S REALLY ASKING, YOU CAN ANSWER HER QUESTION MORE DIRECTLY.**

Before you answer, think about:

- Your own values and attitudes about sexuality.
- How much factual information you want to give her.
- How much factual information she can understand at this age.

**REMEMBER:**

Both boys and girls have questions about their bodies.

It is important to teach both boys and girls about the anatomy of both sexes, and to explain that there's a special reason why their bodies are different.

It's all right to say, "I don't know how I want to answer that question right now. Let me think about it and answer you later." Be sure to *really go back and answer it later!*

If you really aren't sure how to answer so that your child will understand, you may want to use one of the many books available on the subject. Read the book carefully before you share it with your child, to make sure you are comfortable with the way it presents the information.

A child's curiosity can be used as a guide in providing information. But avoid giving a "lecture." A simple, direct answer in a conversational tone is far more effective.

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**STEP THREE: DECIDE ON YOUR RESPONSE.**

**Sample conversation:**

- Child:** Why don't I have a penis?  
**Parent:** Do you have any ideas about that?  
**Child:** Because I didn't grow one yet?  
**Parent:** No. Girls don't have a penis because their bodies are different from boys'. You have something else that is very special. You have a vagina and a clitoris.  
**Child:** But will I ever have a penis?  
**Parent:** No, you'll always have a vagina and a clitoris. Why do you want to have a penis?  
**Child:** Because I'd like to pee standing up.  
**Parent:** Well, girls have a special opening near their vagina for going to the bathroom. I know it looks like fun to pee standing up, but girls have their own special bodies that make them different from boys. It's that way on purpose.

A conversation like this will probably satisfy a young child's curiosity. As the child grows older, s/he may continue asking questions, and the answers may require more detail.

**Notes:**

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