

Helping kids have a healthy relationship with sex and their bodies starts when they're young. But as a parent sometimes I don't know what to say or how to say it! In this book, Dr. Laura Hancock and Dr. Karen Rayne offer an informative, practical, and readable guide to navigating this tricky area. I learned a lot from this book and feel empowered to have better conversations with my children.

—**DEBBIE SORENSEN, PhD**, COHOST OF *PSYCHOLOGISTS OFF THE CLOCK* PODCAST AND AUTHOR OF *ACT FOR BURNOUT* AND *ACT DAILY JOURNAL*

Sex Ed for the Stroller Set is a precious gift to families, children, and educators everywhere. In a culture where “sex ed” for young children is so often reduced to the notion of “The Talk,” Hancock and Rayne brilliantly capture—page by page by page—the countless ways that supporting healthy sexual development resides in the daily living experiences within families and schools and as an integral part of a child's ongoing physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

—**DEBORAH M. ROFFMAN, MS, CSE, CFLE**, HUMAN SEXUALITY EDUCATOR, AUTHOR, AND CONSULTANT

Those of us who've worked in the sexuality field have long observed that young people and adults who have a childhood with thoughtful and comfortable bodies, relationships, sex and boundaries information, and parenting usually have much better outcomes than those who don't. Positive parenting in this department is something we know tends to result in more fulfilling and comfortable sexual lives, healthier and more beneficial relationships, better body image and boundaries, and real ownership and understanding of one's own sexual agency, autonomy, and identity.

Many parents and caregivers want to provide all of this and more for children, but they don't know how, or they feel so overwhelmed or intimidated that they freeze up even trying to start. Enter *Sex Ed for the Stroller Set* and the incredible wealth of information and empathetic coaching Karen and Laura provide within its pages. *Sex Ed for the Stroller Set* is holistic and rich while also being very easy to read and digest. You'll find information about childhood sexual development by stages and sexuality, self-awareness help for yourself, and other vital basics like anatomy, gender, orientation, boundaries, and abuse prevention and awareness, presented in practical, useful, and actionable ways. I feel certain every reader of this book will feel more knowledgeable, confident, and comfortable as a parent sex educator than they imagined they could before they found it.

—HEATHER CORINNA, AUTHOR AND FOUNDER OF SCARLETEEN

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Introduction:

Sex Ed Begins at Birth



Laura, one of the coauthors of this book, walked into her friend Jen's¹ house one hot Texas afternoon and was excited to greet two of her favorite kids. This particular afternoon, Mia, now 3 years old, and Logan, age 5 years, were sitting around in their underwear, too busy playing to say hello. They were immersed in their game of

¹To protect people's privacy, we have changed the names of all individuals included in our stories.

doctor and patient. Logan was playing the role of doctor. He had removed the round end of a toy stethoscope. With the earpieces snugly around his leg, he was holding the end of the stethoscope hose inside the back of Mia's underwear and "removing her farts." Each time Mia made a farting sound, they would both burst into laughter. Laura noticed, however, that Jen was not laughing. She wasn't panicking, but Laura could see she was uncomfortable, rolling her eyes and smiling sheepishly. She had grown up in a home in which this kind of play would not have been acceptable. Jen knew she wanted to raise her children differently from the way she had been raised. She wanted to be the kind of parent who talked openly with her kids about bodies, bodily functions, privacy, and all the other sexuality topics she could name. And yet, at a moment like this, she didn't know quite what to do. Should she let them play in this way? Should she stop them? How should she stop them? What should she say?

This "removing the farts" episode began a conversation between Jen and Laura. They started to talk about the many situations in which Jen wasn't quite sure what to do. A lot of parents come to both of us—Laura and Karen—with similar questions and uncertainty. At what age should they stop bathing with their child? What can they say when their child asks how the new baby got into Mommy's tummy? What is the best way to respond when their child is playing with their genitals while sitting on the sofa? In this book, we answer these questions (and more), and we help you to understand and respond to situations like these. We also help you to feel more confident and comfortable as we work our way toward becoming a more unshockable, approachable, go-to parent—the kind of parent kids want to talk with when they have questions or concerns about sexuality.

When it comes to teaching kids about sexuality, some educators recommend a more cautionary approach. In this reactive approach, parents do not bring up topics about sexuality themselves, but they

do answer children's questions and react appropriately to situations that occur. If a child asks a question, people with this approach recommend that parents make sure to fully clarify the question and then address only the question asked. The approach we take is proactive—one in which parents intentionally teach their child about sexuality, the same way we would teach them about other topics. We don't wait for a child to ask what color something is or how to say the alphabet, nor do we wait for them to ask about the safest way to cross the street. We teach children all kinds of things about nature, like how plants grow or how to find worms. The same should be true for teaching kids about sexuality. We shouldn't wait for them to ask. Some kids are really curious and ask a lot of questions. Other children are less verbal or ask fewer questions, but they are often just as curious and always need just as much information as children who ask lots of questions. We believe that all children deserve to know information that will help to keep them healthy and safe.

The aim of this book is to equip you to create a strong foundation of sexual health in your child, rather than just handle a particular situation. We give you the tools you need to proactively teach your child about topics that will help them grow into adults with healthy, fulfilling, and pleasurable sex lives and relationships.

This book is intended to help you to

- understand sexuality and what sexual health comprises,
- learn what behaviors and topics are appropriate and essential during early childhood,
- learn tools to teach your child what they need to know about sexuality,
- know what to teach your child to keep them safer from sexual abuse,
- handle the surprising situations and questions you get from your child,

- envision the healthy sexuality you want for your child now and in the future,
- practice techniques for calming your anxiety and feeling confident when talking about sexual topics, and
- become a go-to parent/caregiver and establish a lifelong dialogue with your child about topics that are essential to their well-being.

WHY IS IT HELPFUL TO START TEACHING ABOUT SEXUALITY AT SUCH YOUNG AGES?

This book is for you if you are a parent, caregiver, teacher, or anyone else working with children in *early childhood*, which is defined as the years from birth through age 6 years. For simplicity, we refer to caregivers as “parents” throughout this book. It is important to note, however, that this book is meant for anyone caring for a young child or children.

You may wonder why you should start teaching your child about sexual health from such an early age. Here are some of the most important reasons.

You Are Already Teaching Your Child About Sexuality

Sexuality is about so much more than sex. Sexuality is also about appreciating your own body and keeping it healthy. It’s about requiring others to respect you and your boundaries. It’s about healthy relationships and being aware of your feelings. Through your behaviors, attitudes, feelings, and words, your child is learning about all these topics already. This book strives to help you to make informed decisions about what and how you teach about sexuality. *In this way, you can be conscious of messages you are sending your child, rather than teaching them blindly.*

They Want to Know

Children are naturally curious and eager to soak up information about the world around them. Just as they are fascinated by construction vehicles, bugs, cleaning, or anything else, they are intensely curious about bodies and relationships. This is a wonderful opportunity for us parents to teach them about many aspects of sexuality. *By starting early, we can take advantage of their curiosity and their lack of self-consciousness.*

By Starting Now, You Get to Practice Having Sexuality-Related Conversations

For many parents, thinking or talking about sexuality and bodies can provoke anxiety. For others, they feel comfortable with the topic, but talking with their kids about it just doesn't feel natural. Perhaps they don't know what to say, or they don't know what to do with all the feelings that come up. Just imagine, however, that your child is now a preteen or teenager. Now, a new set of sexual health topics is emerging in their life. They are entering puberty. They are having more sexual feelings. They are hearing things at school. They are exposed to more media. *If you have already had ongoing conversations with your child about sexuality, you will have had years of practice navigating sexuality-related topics with them before the stakes are higher.* Your child will already have a solid foundation of information from which they can process new experiences. And they will have practice coming to you when they need help and have questions.

Knowledge Is Protection

Childhood sexual abuse cannot always be prevented, and it is *never* the fault of the child. *Nevertheless, there are things we can do to lower the risk of abuse.* One of those things is to give children accurate language for sexual topics. This protects children by making predators less likely

to engage with them because the child clearly has an adult they are able to talk with about sexuality. Creating open lines of communication between you and your child increases the chance that you will find out if something inappropriate does happen to them. Without instilling fear, you can teach your child to expect their boundaries to be respected and to respect the boundaries of others through all stages of life.

You Are Your Young Child's Best Sex Ed Teacher

As a parent or primary caregiver, you are the person best suited to teach your young child about these topics. Early on, your child will get all their information from a small number of people, including you and other primary caregivers. They will develop a deep level of trust and connection with you. This is the time to pour in all the good feelings, values, and information you want them to have. As your child gets older, their world will expand, they will naturally gain broader influences in their life, and they will remain curious. Older kids will inevitably have a broader access to information about sexuality through the internet, other media, and their peers. Not all this exposure will be helpful, healthy, or accurate. If you have been educating them and giving them accurate resources, your child will be more equipped to discern fact from fiction and get answers to their questions in appropriate ways. One of the best ways your child can get accurate information is from you. When you show your child early on that you answer their questions without anger, shame, or judgment and that you talk about hard topics, you become the kind of parent whom they can trust with their questions.

Sexual Health Is Fundamental to Your Child's Well-Being

As parents, we have an instinctive urge to help our child be happy and fulfilled, and we work really hard to give our child the best start

in life that we can. *Sexual health is essential to overall health.* Helping your child develop healthy sexuality from their earliest years is one of the greatest gifts you can give your child.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Laura and Karen each started teaching about sexual health in different ways.

Laura



Laura had a meandering route to her role in sexual health education. She grew up outside Chicago with a father who worked in graphic design and mother who was a nurse. Along with her two siblings, she was encouraged to foster her talents in both art and science, and in 1997, she earned her bachelor of fine arts degree from Washington University in St. Louis.

Along with her desire to explore the world through art, Laura had always been fascinated by the intersection between human biology and behavior, and she completed a second major in physical anthropology while earning her bachelor's degree. Eventually, she decided to pursue a graduate degree at The University of Texas at Austin, where she studied biological anthropology and psychology. Her research, which took her to various field sites in places such as Costa Rica and Madagascar, focused on understanding human evolution and behavior through the study of the anatomy, biology, and behavior of nonhuman primates (i.e., apes, monkeys, and lemurs). During her graduate career, she was asked to give a guest lecture for a class on primate biology for which she chose to include a lot of information about human reproductive biology. Following the lecture, a student

approached her and said, “Thank you for teaching that class. I never knew about any of that stuff.” That moment stuck with her.

After earning her doctoral degree in anthropology in 2009, Laura wanted to apply her academic interests and her love of teaching and writing to something new. She shifted her focus to helping young people understand their own body and biology, feel good about themselves, and make healthy decisions. In 2012, Laura became certified to teach kids aged 5 to 19 years about sexual health. Throughout her training in sexual health education, she realized that most of the sexuality topics young people learn about are already important before children enter elementary school. But there was a catch: Although parents of young children had encountered situations in which they wanted to teach their child about sexuality, it was rare that they felt confident about what was appropriate or what to do. Thus, Laura created a unique, new curriculum teaching parents and other caregivers how to educate young children about healthy sexuality.

Laura now lives in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, with her husband and daughter. There, she likes to walk in nature, study Dutch, see art, make art, read, and enjoy their bikecentric city.

Karen



Karen is originally from Texas and has felt called to work with teenagers since she was a teenager. She originally set out to be a high school English teacher but quickly realized that the topic wasn't the right match for her teaching career. After nevertheless earning her bachelor of arts degree in English and secondary education, Karen went back to school to get her master of arts degree and doctoral degree in educational

psychology. In her last semester of grad school, the same month as she was defending her dissertation and still not sure what she would do professionally when she graduated, Karen was asked to provide sex education for a friend and her teenage daughter who had experienced a pregnancy scare. Karen dove in, fell in love with the content, and hasn't looked back since! In the subsequent 20 years, Karen's focus has expanded from teenagers to a lifespan approach to sexuality education. She has worked at and written for universities, nonprofits, United Nations affiliates, and with individuals all around the world.

OTHER VOICES

Throughout this book you will also hear from other parents. In an effort to provide you with real-life parenting examples from a diverse group of caregivers, we sent out requests via social media to look for parents who would be willing to write down some of their stories. The seven contributors who got in touch with us are all parents or coparents. Some are friends and colleagues, and others we have never met. From both the United States and the Netherlands, these contributors offer some interesting insights into the similarities and differences between the two cultures.

Like these seven contributors, every parent we have talked with has a story (or many!) about the sexuality questions or situations they have encountered with their child. Most parents have been taken by surprise at some point by their child's sexuality questions or behavior. We view these surprises as a fun and challenging part of the parenting journey that keeps us on our toes.

We have included one last group of contributors in this book. At the end of Chapter 10, you can read success stories from three families in which the parents have made a concerted effort to talk openly and honestly with their children about sexuality from the

beginning. You will also get to hear from grown children in these families. These testimonials illustrate what we can look forward to in the future: Adult children who feel free to talk with us parents about their questions and experiences, who feel pride and agency over their own sexuality, and who have been supported with knowledge rather than hindered by shame.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is separated into two parts. Part I, *What You Need to Know First*, gives you background information to prepare you for teaching your child and includes these chapters:

- Chapter 1 is an introduction to understanding sexuality from a holistic perspective.
- Chapter 2 helps you to prepare by getting to know yourself a bit better. This chapter on self-awareness is an important one because regulating your emotions is one of the key components to teaching your child about sexuality without shame.
- In Chapters 3 and 4, we get you up to speed with concepts and terms related to gender identity, sexual orientation, and reproductive anatomy and physiology.
- Chapter 5 is dedicated to one of the most pressing issues around sexual health: understanding, preventing, and responding to child sexual abuse.

Part II of the book, *The Ages and Stages of Teaching Sexual Health During Early Childhood*, is dedicated to giving you all the practical information you need to know to teach your young child about healthy sexuality. This part consists of these chapters:

- Chapters 6, 7, and 8 discuss the three age groups in early childhood—infancy, toddlerhood, and kindergarten—in which

we let you know *how* kids are learning, *what* they are learning about sexuality, and how *you* can teach them.

- Chapter 9 is dedicated to responding to surprising questions and situations.
- Chapter 10, the last chapter, is about some of the things you can expect in later years.

As you read the stories and chapters in this book, we hope you'll recognize your own hopes and struggles. Know that you are not alone on this journey.