

*As a warm-up, take a few minutes to try to find a word for every letter in the alphabet that has to do with the themes of love, relationships, bodies or sexuality.*

*In order to name our feelings, needs and desires, to negotiate sexualities with others, to say yes or to say no, we need accurate terms and a common vocabulary.*

A	N
B	O
C	P
D	Q
E	R
F	S
G	T
H	U
I	V
J	W
K	X
L	Y
M	Z

Although we may sometimes have the feeling that sexuality is omnipresent in our society, we aren't accustomed to speaking seriously about sexuality, and it is often difficult to find the right words. Especially when we want to answer children's questions in a responsible and factual way.

- ▶ When is the right time and how do I talk about these topics?
- ▶ How can I be a trusted person for children and adolescents to come to with questions and concerns?
- ▶ How can I support them in learning their own boundaries, not entering into dangerous situations and, in the best-case scenario, living their sexualities autonomously?

***When we talk about sex, we often say something about ourselves.***

We end up providing much more information about how we see the world than about reproduction or sexuality itself. We make it clear for which actions people should feel shame. We hint at which kind of love (between which people) we consider "normal." We disclose who is to blame in situations of sexual misconduct or violence and we create different rules of behavior for girls and boys/women and men.

*Most of this happens subconsciously, in passing.*

For example, when we try to provide excuses for uncomfortable or embarrassing situations. Or when we try not to blush as we explain “the thing with the eggs and the sperm.” But also, when we consider if we should buy our son those glittery tennis shoes he asked for.

Sexuality is in more places and is relevant in more situations than you might think. ***It's not always about WHAT you explain, but HOW and WHY.*** Then the question of the “right” age to talk to children is less relevant.

## SEXUALISATION

*... or, how I became who I am.*

Sexual socialization. That sounds a bit like sexualization. However, sexualization refers to the ubiquitous use of sex and sexual imagery (for example in commercials for alcoholic beverages or at the hardware store). Sexual socialization refers to how people are socialized in a sexual context.

***Sexual socialization means ...***

The way in which we are taught about sexuality, in which situations we first encountered the topic of sexuality, our first sexual experiences – with ourselves and with others- they all influence the way we relate to sexuality now. These experiences and (often unintentional) teachings have influenced what we consider especially embarrassing or which topics we will discuss loudly in a cafe with friends without using euphemistic language.

Children and adolescents don't just learn content from us. They learn HOW we talk about sex. Therefore, we should reflect on our own sexual socialization. Simply because your positions affect you and will affect what you pass along to children and adolescents. It is important to examine one's sexual socialization to speak professionally, unexcitedly, and honestly and avoid unintentionally passing along personal attitudes or positions without prior reflection.

*Therefore, we will take some time to answer the following questions:*

- ▶ How/from whom were you educated on the topic of sex/sexuality? What feelings did it trigger for you?
- ▶ Which questions did you have then, which uncertainties?
- ▶ Who could you ask when you had a question about love, bodies, sexuality, etc?
- ▶ What did you imagine that sex would be like? Where did these images or ideas come from?
- ▶ When you think about the feelings and the unanswered questions that you had then, what do you wish could be different for children and adolescents today?
- ▶ How can you contribute to making this difference?
- ▶ Which sexual topics can you talk about freely? Which ones make you uncomfortable?
- ▶ Where do words fail you? Which words do you not want to say/topics do you not want to talk about?

*Note the wishes and goals that you have for children and adolescents in their handling of sexuality (independent of age):*

## **Notes:**

### ***Why do we need to talk about sexuality?***

- ▶ Talking about which touches belong in a sexual context is necessary for the prevention of sexual harassment and assault.
- ▶ Talking about feelings teaches people to better perceive their own boundaries and the boundaries of others.

### ***Information about..***

- ▶ how trust can be built,
- ▶ how partners can build closeness and intimacy in other ways,
- ▶ how people can approach their first sexual experiences with others,

does not harm children and adolescents. Nowadays, many adolescents gather information from pornography. Despite the proliferation of pornography, most of the material represents a very small portion of actual human sexuality. Teenagers who are having their first experiences are often not aware how diverse and multi-layered sexuality can be.

Many studies have shown that the earlier children are taught about sex and sexuality, the later they have their “first time.” Sexual drive develops independently of sexual education, starting with puberty. The unknown loses a bit of its appeal when it is more known. And the more I know about what partners do with each other, the more I realize how many levels of sexual intensity there are, the less pressure I feel to do it all right now.

## ***We call things by their names.***

*Okay. We should/want to talk with children and adolescents about sexuality and bodies or something along those lines, but we haven't decided which words we will use. So let's call things by their names.*

*Write down all the words that you can think of for genitals.*

## ***Look at your list of words ...***

- ▶ Which feel okay for you, which would you say out loud (*in a situation where you would need to use the word in public*)?
- ▶ Which of these terms do you personally use in discussions?
- ▶ Which words make you feel uncomfortable?
- ▶ In which situations are certain words fitting or unfitting? And why?
- ▶ Which feelings do they evoke in you?

In general, everyone should be able to ***use language they are comfortable with, as long as it doesn't demean others.***

This means that one should meet the person they are speaking with where they are at and find a common vocabulary together. You decide which terms you use. It is important not to force yourself to use jargon that you associate with young people, because it will cost you authenticity. Rather, you should use trusted terms that will be understandable and comfortable to the other person. Looking for alternatives to known terms together can also lead to a useful broadening of vocabulary.

*This applies not only to genitals, but also to all terms around falling in love, feelings, kissing/making out, reproduction, etc..*

## General Tips for Talking about Sexuality

### 1. Always take the time that you need to answer a question.

Some questions can be answered quickly and concisely, for others there are multiple answers. Many questions from adolescents will be “coded” and therefore require a bit more composure and attentiveness in their answers. For example, the question about “average penis size” may be code for “am I okay how I am?” Issues of performance pressure and uncertainty often accompany these sorts of questions and an ideal answer should offer some semblance of relief.

### 2. You don't have to explain everything in detail.

Pretty much any question can be answered age-appropriately, if you make sure that the answer corresponds to the question-asker's current lived experiences. Children and adolescents are interested in many different things and it is our task to give them adequate, honest and fitting answers to their questions. No more and no less.

### 3. Sexual education is not just the birds and the bees.

When we talk about sexuality, we talk about feelings, consent, gender relations, desires, boundaries, etc. This often happens unknowingly, in passing. For that reason, it is important to consciously reflect upon what we are unconsciously teaching about these topics and HOW we are doing it.

### 4. Be direct. But that doesn't mean explicit.

For most children, body parts like eggs, sperm, uterus, etc. don't carry a different value than an elbow or a bellybutton. They only learn that most adults feel differently through the way that you deal with these topics. Children don't know what sex means for adults. Maybe right now they only want to know how a sperm cell meets up with an egg.

### 5. Use concrete examples in your answer that have to do with the lived experiences of the question-answerer and are therefore relevant.

#### Ideas for when you are at a loss for words:

*“That is a good question.  
Let me think about it a bit.”*

*“I have to think about that.  
Let's talk about it later today.”*

*“I actually don't know exactly.  
I will do a bit of research and  
let you know what I find out.”*

*“That is pretty difficult to explain  
and right now isn't a great time  
for me to try. But let's talk about it  
when we get home.”*

*These phrases should not lead to  
indefinite postponing or ignoring of the  
questions, but should actually lead to a  
later discussion and answer.*

*This idea comes from  
Cory Silverberg's reader's guide  
to his book „What Makes A Baby?“.*

Write down a few questions  
that might be asked of you  
and try to answer them!

## Notes:

In their panic about answering questions, adults forget easily and readily that sex is much, much more than *“the birds and the bees”*. When the topic is the creation of babies, it can be practical, but it also doesn't need to be a part of pre-puberty sexual education. Additionally, it is not very helpful when that is the only picture that is conveyed about sexuality.

However, if adolescents google sex, they will find exactly that. Not kissing, not cuddling. They might find that in Hollywood romances, but only in a way that is far from reality. The content missing from google searches and Hollywood films might be very important material for discussions.

Sexuality plays a lifelong role in people's lives – in different ways. Age- and developmentally-appropriate sexual education is applied for different target groups. Children are often interested in where babies come from, how they grow and come out of a stomach. Adolescents are often occupied with questions of identity, effect on others, falling/being in love, how their bodies change during puberty. Sexual education doesn't end with adulthood. Topics like relationship forms, lived sexuality, family formation, raising children, dealing with breakups, long-term contraception and menopause become more important.

*More examples of questions, that are interesting at different points in time and can be guided with sexual education:*

- ▶ How are twins made?
- ▶ How does a baby come out of the body?
- ▶ What is menstruation, puberty and when does it start and end?
- ▶ Is my body okay as it is?
- ▶ What is the “first time” like?
- ▶ What should I consider with contraception?
- ▶ How can I support children and adolescents in learning their own boundaries, not entering into dangerous situations and, in the best-case scenario, living their sexualities autonomously?
- ▶ How and when do I introduce a new partner?
- ▶ Do I have to make my sexual orientation a topic in the workplace?

Clarify in your own words all that sexuality can be and keep this in your head when you are talking with others about sexuality so that you can use *language as a powerful instrument to dismantle prejudice and discrimination!*

*Which pictures do you have  
of sexuality? Of the first time?  
Of a “good” relationship?  
Etc.*

*Did you think about the diversity of*

- ▶ sexual orientations
- ▶ gender identities
- ▶ different bodily conditions
- ▶ different age groups
- ▶ etc.

## **An example:**

*How do you talk about bodies?*

The topic of bodies is often connected to self-love and self-worth and therefore will often be brought up in discussions of sexuality (i.e. *Am I even worth loving? Am I attractive enough? I should be happy if someone wants to sleep with me, looking like I do...etc.*) It is time to consider what kind of image of a loveable body we convey.

*Pause for a moment  
and consider...*

- ▶ How do you talk about your own body?  
What do you criticize?
- ▶ How and when do you talk about the bodies of others?
- ▶ Which eating behaviors do we berate automatically?  
Who should become big and strong? Who gets compliments for looking slim?
- ▶ Zu wem sagen wir öfter, dass er/sie hübsch, schlau, stark, kreativ, mutig ist? Lassen wir manche Worte weg? Kommentieren wir eher Aktivitäten oder Aussehen?

## **Does it always have to be embarrassing?**

As adults, sex probably plays a role in our lives. Even if we don't have sex or only have sex seldomly, we might think about why that is, how we can spice up our sex lives, etc. Sex – after we finally survived puberty – should no longer be a topic that always makes us giggle. Rather, it should be something that we as mature adults can talk about normally. However, it isn't always, and we sometimes hope that the day won't come soon when our kids ask us questions about sex. But we are overlooking one thing:

### ***Kids don't know intuitively what sex means for adults.***

Oft wollen sie nur ein kleines bisschen Information zur Frage, woher sie eigentlich kommen. Das muss aber nicht bedeuten, dass wir mit ihnen gleich über sexuelle Praktiken reden müssen. Überhaupt nicht.

Often, they just want a little bit of information about where they come from. That doesn't mean that we have to start talking them through different sexual practices.

This shouldn't be an excuse to delay discussions about sexuality and reproduction indefinitely. Children will notice if the topic is uncomfortable for us and we don't want to/can't talk about it. The culture of secrecy influences how young people learn to think and talk about sexuality and can prevent them from asking questions when they really need to (for example, as they are going through puberty).