# Birds, Bees and HIV

How to talk to kids about sex when you're HIV positive, without scaring them—and yourself

January 1, 2008 By Logan Levkoff

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Talking to kids about sex has never been easy. And there's no one script that parents can follow to ensure maximum education. Nor is there one perfect time or age for "the talk." But as parents, it is our responsibility to teach our children about sex. We cannot rely on our schools, with their increasingly abstinence-based curricula, to do it.

What would change this dialogue for an HIV-positive parent? Would the factual information about sex be the same? Yes. Would parents still want their teens to protect themselves whenever they made the decision to have sex? Yes. Our goal, regardless of our HIV status, is to provide healthy, positive messages. So don't panic—remember, these conversations are challenging for everyone.

Instead of unloading years' worth of information in 10 minutes, create an ongoing dialogue. This can be done by checking in with your children—asking them what they know already, and what they would like to know. Teaching them about sexuality is as much about listening as it is talking. They are exposed to a tremendous amount of sexual imagery and messaging, and we should give them the tools to evaluate them. Create environments that are nonjudgmental and honest. That means we shouldn't scare children with the horrors of sex; talk also about pleasure and intimacy. Otherwise, our kids will know that we aren't giving them the whole picture; they won't ask us for advice again.

Don't feel guilty about your HIV status when discussing sex; use your experience as a teaching tool. Talk about the decisions you made, and explain that HIV can be prevented. But even if your child does know about HIV, there's a lot more to talking about sexuality than just the basics of HIV. (If you haven't disclosed your status yet, keep in mind that how you present sexuality to your children shapes how they will handle your eventual disclosure; you don't want to freak them out or make it harder for them to process your status.)

We also need to share our own histories with our children. We don't have to relate our every sexual experiment, but we should help explain why we made certain decisions, including how our world looked. Were we concerned about sexual health? Were our pop-culture icons walking around without panties? Our teens will get a sense of who we are and, more important, feel that we cared enough about them to share a glimpse into our personal lives. It's OK if this frightens you—especially if you find yourself opening up about how you became positive. But your kids need

to know how to make good decisions. If we don’t talk to our kids about sexuality, millions of less reputable sources will be more than happy to do it for us.

**Doing It By the Book**

Logan Levkoff, MS, is a sexologist and sexuality educator based in New York City. Her book, *Third Base Ain’t What It Used to Be* (New American Library), empowers and encourages parents to start being honest with their children about sexuality. She tackles all the tough topics, including (but not limited to) masturbation, oral sex and pornography. Click here for more articles.

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