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That's Disgusting, Dad!

The time to stop talking is when the other person nods his head affirmatively
but says nothing.

—HENRY S. HASKINS

Talking about sex for the first time with your child is bound to make you anxious. However, if we let anxiety get the better of us, our talk is likely to be clumsy and unsuccessful. Our kids are uncomfortable enough with the idea of this conversation, so they certainly won't be the ones to keep it flowing.

Any one who teaches middle school boys' health classes will tell you what I mean. In the typical "health" class on puberty, half the boys are quiet and serious and the other half can't stop giggling and cracking jokes. But no wonder kids are confused! Usually they get in trouble for saying words like penis and sex—and now a teacher is saying the words and encouraging them to talk about these topics. The poor teacher at best is able to convey a little information. The larger impact is generally made by the wisecrackers who boast that they have the largest penis in the class or loudly ask if it's possible to drown in a nocturnal emission.

As a parent, however, you are going for something different than the one-time awkward talk about sex. You have the honor and challenge of shaping an ongoing exchange with your child about sex. In this context, your children may bring you their questions and anxieties that come up in everyday life. During middle school, you'll want to ask what's going on in their health class, so that you can help deal with any questions they felt uncomfortable asking about in school. Regardless of what's being taught at school, it's helpful to review details so that you know what points have stuck and what's still not so clear. There may be a lag between sex ed and what's going on with your own child, so tune into your child and tailor your comments accordingly.

"Isn't puberty class hysterical?"

As I previously mentioned, kids' bodies usually start changing and developing mature sexual features before early adolescence. Most kids are aware of the changes and may raise some tough questions for you to answer, such as: "Why's this happening?" "Am I normal?" "How does this change things?" And others may be afraid to say anything to their parents at all. While kids probably already know that these changes affect their ability to create babies, they may also know that the changes have a lot to do with the power to create sexual pleasure.

Given the inherently strange mixture of playfulness and anxiety in sex-ed class, your child should find your relaxed conversation particularly welcome. Having a more focused, open, and comfortable talk about having babies is an excellent way to deepen your communication.

A child's home should feel like the best and safest place to learn about sexual matters. Giving children privacy, within a safe, personal setting, is an important prerequisite. These private talks should be just the two of you.

When we talk to our children about sex, it helps if we keep the language and tone consistent with our everyday relationship so that our kids feel comfortable. Don't expect the conversation to go exactly as you had planned. Be prepared for the inevitable digressions and questions (that's one of the

advantages of having more conversations to look forward to). Often, not all of your kids' information will be accurate—on some points they will be well-informed, but don't assume they have correctly connected the dots between the bits of information they've collected from here and there. They're often on target in some areas and totally off base in others.

The following conversations are generally more comfortable for a child when conducted with the same-sex parent. With care and preparation, however, opposite-sex parents can also have these conversations successfully with their kids. Alternatively, single parents may wish to find trustworthy same-sex adults to have these conversations with their children.

Getting Down to Details . . . with a 10-Year-Old Boy

Here's an example of how a conversation might go with a young boy about the male anatomy. This is the approach I used with my own son a few years ago. Of course, you will adjust this to fit your own personal style and relationship with your child, but this may give you some ideas of how to start. I began by bringing in an illustrated textbook. (Visuals make things clearer, more concrete, and therefore less mysterious, and they also give you something to lean on in case you're feeling a bit unsure of the anatomical details.) There were a lot of details to cover, so I spread the conversation out over several talks so my son could better absorb the information. Our conversation went something like this:

I know that you have some ideas about how babies are made—we talked about this before, and you also learned some things from your friends and your health class at school. But it's important to understand how your body works so that you will feel comfortable and confident with it as you get older. So let's begin by talking about how a boy is different from a girl—how does that sound to you?

Of course, my son's response wasn't at all consistent with the script that I had going in my mind. He exclaimed, "That's disgusting!"

Ah, children.

This response was totally age-appropriate, but it's important that you don't simply take it at face value—it doesn't necessarily mean that he wasn't ready to hear this information. It was really just a typical defensive reaction from a young boy to a subject that stirs anxiety. I could tell from his body language—he was wide-eyed and looking attentively at the book I was holding—that he was curious.

But sometimes words do mean that you shouldn't proceed. A child's body language can also communicate a genuine "No, please stop." I can recall the time my dad and uncle decided to fill me in on the facts of life. I was sitting, rather bored, in the living room, thumbing through a magazine during a family visit. Winking at each other—we were the only three in the room—they zeroed in on the subject.

"So Stan, when you were around 12, did you start noticing girls?"

I was totally uncomfortable as sex had always been a suppressed, secretive topic in our home. Their casual approach felt completely out of step. I was 13, and until then I had hardly ever talked about anything very personal with my dad. Most of what I knew I had just stumbled across on my own. Suddenly, I felt like a hostage between these two old codgers bombarding me with the facts of life. I buried my head in a magazine, pretending not to hear their very indirect chat about how kids need to know "their job" in "making babies." Their attempt to communicate now strikes me as funny. Be assured, however, that you can see the signs that indicate when your child is listening—check out eyes, face, words, and body language to tell if you're getting through.

After my son had declared, "That's disgusting!" I decided to forge ahead, based on his body language. Our conversation continued as follows.

The Penis

I've heard you and your friends call the penis at least a hundred different names, but regardless of what you call it, you should know that it's technically just called the penis. But more important

than the names you give it is your understanding of what it is and how it works because it's a very important part of your body. A man is usually very concerned about his penis because it's the body part that most distinctly says that he's a man and also because if it gets hurt, it really hurts! Now, you know that your penis is soft and smooth on the outside, but what do you think it's like on the inside?

Remember that this is a conversation, not a lecture, and the back and forth—asking questions and listening—makes all the difference in the world.

Inside, there's a spongy tissue that fills with blood and becomes hard at certain times. When the penis hardens, that's called an erection. You may have noticed this happening to yours, maybe even without your doing anything to make it happen. It even happens to guys sometimes during their sleep! Of course, the most common reason this happens is that the guy becomes turned on—aroused, or excited—sexually. We'll talk more a bit later about why it's really useful for the penis to become hard like this when a guy gets sexually aroused.

Although your son probably already knows that sex happens for many reasons—for pleasure and for creation of new life—it may feel appropriate to save the discussion of sex as purely for physical pleasure until a few years later—when you will follow up on these initial talks.

On the inside, the penis has three layers: two make up the shaft while the third holds the urethra—the tube that carries urine (your pee), semen, and sperm. All of this stuff comes out of the penis at different times. So that urine does not come out of your penis when you ejaculate (which means to release sperm), a special muscle shuts off the bladder. That's kind of a relief, isn't it, because otherwise we'd have a mess! Do you know what the difference is between semen and sperm?

Semen is a filmy, white fluid that contains sperm—reproductive cells that can fertilize a woman's egg. When a baby is made, half of the genes come from the mother, and the other half come from the father—and the dad's half is in the sperm. In a minute or two, we'll talk about how semen gets a chance to get in there and fertilize a woman's egg.

Now the very top or “head” of the penis—called the glans—is very sensitive. When we're born it is covered by foreskin, which may be removed in a procedure called circumcision. And circumcised and uncircumcised penises look different.

At this point I opened the book to pictures of a circumcised and an uncircumcised penis, and I asked my son if he had noticed differences between the penises of other boys when changing in the locker room during gym at school. This would be a good time to mention whether your son's penis is circumcised or uncircumcised and to discuss why parents make these choices, specifically the reasons behind your decision.

The Testicles and the Scrotum

Now, the testicles—I know you know about these—are often called nuts or balls. These produce the sperm. The scrotum is the bag or sack that hangs under the penis and contains the testicles. The surface of the scrotum is almost always rough and wrinkly. I know that you learned in school that the scrotum hangs outside the body so that the sperm in the testicles don't get too hot and die. In fact, the scrotum also tightens and pulls closer to the body when it gets too cold out: we can't be roasting or freezing the sperm if they're going to live! In general, the scrotum is one to five degrees cooler than the rest of the body. If the temperature in the scrotum is raised above ninety-eight degrees, you can become temporarily sterile, which means that, right then, the sperm are not able to fertilize a woman's egg to make a baby. But don't worry, you make millions of new sperm every day!

You've probably already heard about testosterone—the male hormone made in the testicles. Testosterone is a chemical that your body makes, which creates lots of changes in you. The effects of higher levels of testosterone in your body have already begun to kick in for you, and you'll really start to notice them when you enter your teens. In part, it's testosterone that's putting the hair under your arms. More than any other chemical, this hormone makes you develop manly features: a deeper voice (you can both speculate about what he'll sound like in a few years, possibly adding some welcome humor to the situation), hair on your chest, face, legs, arms, and around your penis.

The Prostate

So while the testicles make the sperm, there's another part of your body that makes semen, which carries the sperm: it's called the prostate. The prostate is a little gland that's just for making that milky white fluid called semen. When a man releases semen and sperm, it is called ejaculation. When this happens, a man shoots out about 500 million sperm! There's no way we can imagine that number of sperm, but they will nevertheless come out of you.

The changes we've been talking about really step up during puberty—usually at ages 11 to 12 although boys often move into puberty more slowly than girls. When puberty begins, you are actually physically able to get a girl pregnant! This may be hard to believe because when kids start going through these changes, they're still kids themselves and too young to take care of a baby. So although this topic may seem disgusting to you, it's important to understand because it involves a new kind of responsibility. All right, now that we've covered the basics about how your body functions, let's take a minute to talk about how all this stuff works in practice.

Intercourse

I know you've heard about intercourse already. You and your friends probably call it sex or doing it. Or do you call it something else? Intercourse refers specifically to an act that a man and a woman do together sexually. There are other kinds of sex too, but intercourse is the kind that can lead to a baby, so let's look at that right now.

This kind of intercourse is also called vaginal intercourse because it involves a man putting his erect penis into a woman's vagina. Do you remember discussing a few minutes ago how the penis works? I mentioned that the penis's ability to erect when a man is sexually excited is a very useful thing. Upon erection, the penis can fit into a woman's vagina—an opening in her body near to where the penis is located on a man's body. It's important that the penis can fit into the vagina because babies are made when male sperm and a female egg get together, and this all happens inside the woman's body. In order to get the sperm to the egg, the man has to do what we discussed before, which is ejaculate, inside the woman, and then the sperm can swim around and go find the egg. When the sperm and egg meet up, the egg gets fertilized, and this is what grows into a baby.

Does this make sense to you? Sometimes it's a little hard to understand, but you don't have to worry about getting it all right now. We'll talk about it again, and you know that you can always ask me about anything that's confusing.

If you haven't already spoken with your son about values and how they guide sexual activity, this would be a good opportunity to “sow the seeds,” so to speak, about topics like abstinence and safe sex. While your son at age 9 or 10 will probably find the explicit references to sex a little too much to handle without intensely reacting—whether by squirming around or verbally protesting—letting him know that such issues are fair game for your talks is valuable. Mentioning the subject now may break the ice for future discussions.

Question Time

When I had this talk with my son, he took me up on my invitation to ask questions and raised a few good ones.

“What makes the semen come out?” he asked.

I explained how the excitement builds up in your body during sex from rubbing against (and into) your partner. I explained how the excitement hits its highest level when you have what's called an orgasm and you ejaculate. He also asked if orgasm was painful or if it felt like urine coming out, and I responded that it felt really good. This, of course, led to a future conversation.

Another question that came to his mind involved what happens to all the other sperm when they go into the woman's vagina. I explained to him that they either spill out or get washed out with the fluid (called seminal fluid).

As you can see, it's important that you convey accurate information, but it's just as valuable to use these talks as an opportunity to enhance the quality of your relationship with your children—and to encourage their questions and promote their understanding. These conversations feel natural when

you've already built a foundation of trust and openness with your child. By contrast, the well-intentioned yet awkward conversation between my father, my uncle, and me was not based on a foundation of openness, particularly on the topic of sexuality.

Conversations like this should occur in similar detail regarding the anatomy of both sexes. While it is helpful to use an anatomy book for structure, being sensitive to what your child already knows, or thinks that he or she knows, is crucial.

Though I chose to have a conversation with my son, there are several different ways to review this information. If you're not sure about sustaining a conversation at length or if your kid is shy about these things, you can watch a video and discuss it together. Or, as previously suggested, you could try taking shorter parts of the script above and have shorter talks that begin to build a foundation for an open relationship between you and your child in the future.

Getting Down to Details . . . with a 9-Year-Old Girl

Similar conversations with girls usually take place around the age of 9. But because the age of onset of menstruation is growing increasingly younger, some girls may need to hear it sooner—even as early as age 7 or 8—so that you are sure it comes before their first period. Depending on your daughter's personality, she may communicate with you about changes in her body, such as noticing her breasts beginning to develop. However, because she may be too shy to bring this up, you need to be observant of your daughter's bodily growth. If you notice that she seems to be physically maturing earlier than you expected, don't be alarmed—but you may want to ask your pediatrician's advice on whether it's time to begin a conversation about periods and puberty. If the pediatrician indicates that now would be an appropriate time, based on the pace of your daughter's physical changes, find a good time to have a talk with her.

Here's a sample of what a conversation with a 9-year-old girl might look like. As with the boy, the conversation can be divided up into several talks according to your daughter's responsiveness and attention span. A book with anatomical drawings will be a useful reference in this conversation, especially when it comes time to explain the mechanics of menstruation. Don't be discouraged if she is reluctant to have this conversation. However, it would make good sense to discuss her apprehension rather than barreling ahead. The talk might begin like this:

Honey, I know that you've probably noticed lately that girls your age are starting to have some changes happening in their bodies. A lot of your friends have gotten a lot taller this year—you've grown a lot too!—and you've noticed that your breasts are beginning to develop a little bit. You've probably learned in health class at school about the changes that happen to boys and girls as they become teenagers and then adults, but I thought maybe we could talk about these changes in case there are other things you want to know. How does that sound to you?

Menstruation

One of the things that will happen is that you'll get your period. You might start soon, or you might not get it for a few years—it varies a lot in different girls. I got my period when I was 13, but one of my best friends got hers when she was 11, and another one when she was 16! But even if you don't get it for a while, you'll want to learn about it because, chances are, your friends are going to start talking about it a lot, and I want you to know what's going on so you don't get confused.

Do you know what a period is? The scientific name for it is menstruation, and basically, it is when blood is shed from inside your body—from your uterus, where babies grow—and comes out through your vagina. It usually lasts about a week, sometimes a little less or a little more. It's called a period because it happens on a cycle—periodically, just like you call your regular classes at school periods. Most girls and women get their period once a month, but that can also vary a bit depending on the person.

At this point, your daughter might express some fear or squeamishness at the thought of blood—reassure her that it's not as bad as she may think.

One thing that's good to know about your period is that the blood coming out doesn't hurt—it doesn't feel like you've been scratched or cut or anything like that. Sometimes you get cramps in your belly or your back that can be uncomfortable or even painful, but, if that happens, we have medicine and heating pads that can help.

The most important thing you'll have to learn is how to keep yourself and your clothes clean during your period. It's not fun to get stains on your pants! Women usually use special pads, tampons, or both to control their bleeding during their periods. (It's a good idea to have one of each of these handy and to show your daughter how they work.) A pad sticks to your underwear and catches the blood as it comes out of your body, and a tampon goes inside your body and catches the blood before it comes out. When the time comes, I can help you learn how to use both of them, and you can decide which one is more comfortable or easier for you to use. Sometimes you might accidentally get some blood on your underwear or your pants, pajamas, or sheets—and that's okay. Just let me know, and I'll help you wash it out or show you how.

All of this probably seems a little strange to you—it's strange to think that our bodies would bleed when we didn't even hurt ourselves. But the reason it happens is actually really neat; it's linked to a whole process that's going on inside our bodies that we can't see or really even feel. (At this point, it's helpful to have an anatomy book that illustrates the female reproductive and sexual organs.)

The process starts in our ovaries, which are two little organs inside of us that do two things. The ovaries produce hormones called estrogen and progesterone, which are special female hormones that help some other organs to do their jobs. The other thing that ovaries do is hold lots and lots of tiny little eggs. About once a month, one of your ovaries—they usually take turns—will release an egg. This is called ovulation. The egg travels through tubes called the fallopian tubes, which bring the egg from the ovary to the uterus. Even though the fallopian tube is pretty small, the egg's trip through it can last hours or even a couple of days. The egg then sits in your uterus for about a week. For adults, this is the time when babies can be made—a man's sperm can fertilize the egg while it's in the uterus, and then if the fertilized egg attaches itself to the inside of the uterus, a woman becomes pregnant. But while the egg is making the trip from the ovary, through the fallopian tube, and into the uterus, the uterus is making things ready in case a baby is going to grow there. The sides of the uterus begin to get thicker and soft as a lining made of blood and other cells builds up—this way, if the egg gets fertilized and attaches to the wall and a baby starts to develop, the inside of the uterus is nice and comfy and padded so that the baby is protected. But usually the egg doesn't get fertilized, so then the uterus needs to get rid of the lining it just built up—and that's where your period comes in. Your period is just your uterus shedding this protective lining. The lining travels out of the uterus and into your vagina, which is the part right inside of the opening, by going through a little passageway called the cervix.

The cervix can get bigger when a baby is in the uterus and is ready to come out. But when you're just having your period, it stays pretty small. The blood then comes out of your vagina. It's usually pretty slow at first, so when it first happens, you'll see just a little bit of red or brown in your underwear. Just tell me when this happens, and you can put a pad in to catch the blood. You might feel excited or scared or happy or sad or maybe all of these things when you get your period for the first time. But all these feelings are totally normal.

The whole process of how the ovaries and the uterus work together is pretty interesting and complex, and what it means when your period starts is that your body is able to have babies. That might sound pretty weird to you since you're still a kid and certainly aren't ready to have a baby! It's funny that our bodies get ready for having babies before we're really ready. That's a lot of responsibility for kids who aren't ready for babies but whose bodies are. Before we start discussing the other changes that your body will go through, let's take a minute to talk about what actually happens to make a baby.

Intercourse

Your discussion about intercourse to explain how babies come into being may occur in a separate conversation or as part of a discussion about the changes your daughter's body may soon be going through. Here's how the conversation might go:

Because we've been looking at how girls' bodies become ready to make babies when they go through puberty, it's important for you to know exactly what women and men do to have babies.

Babies can be made by something called intercourse. You've heard of this before, but probably under the name of sex, or doing it, or something like that. The term intercourse is used to talk about what women and men do together sexually. There are also other kinds of sex, but intercourse is the kind of sex that can lead to a baby, so we're going to focus on this one right now. This kind of intercourse is also called vaginal intercourse because it involves a man putting his erect penis into a woman's vagina. A man's penis becomes firm because lots of blood flows to it when he is sexually excited, and this helps the penis to fit into the vagina. It's important that the vagina allows the penis in because babies are made when the male sperm from the penis meets a female egg—and this happens all inside a woman's body! So in order to get the sperm to the egg, the man has to do something called ejaculation, where he releases some fluid called semen into the vagina, and then the sperm swims around and finds the egg. Once the sperm and egg meet up, the egg is fertilized and can grow into a baby.

I hope this all makes sense to you. Please ask questions if you're confused though. I know it's pretty complicated, but don't worry about getting it all right now. We'll talk about it again, and you know that you can always ask me about anything that doesn't make sense to you.

You may have already given your daughter a pretty clear view of your values regarding sexual activity by this point in her life, but if you haven't, this might be a good opportunity to introduce a talk about abstinence or safe sex—pointing out that no method of birth control works all the time. You can remind your daughter that sex isn't something she'll really start thinking about for a while—at age 9 or 10 most kids still think the idea's pretty gross!

A Woman's Genitals

There are a lot of details to discuss here, so remember to adjust the depth and length of your conversation according to your audience. Some kids are more cautious or less interested in the details, but others are incredibly eager, and this may be one of the most engaging exchanges you've ever had with your daughter.

Let's go back for a second to talk a bit more about the changes that are happening to your body now. All of the changes that we've talked about so far are changes that happen on the inside of your body, so they may be a little harder to understand since you can't actually see them happening. But you already know that there are parts of your body on the outside that are related to the parts on the inside—such as the outside part of what you call your vagina or privates—or like you called it when you were little, your pee-pee. Did you know that there are names for the different areas on this part of your body?

Again, use an anatomy book or other illustration to show your daughter what each area is.

The part of your genitals that's outside your body is called the vulva. The outer part of the vulva that sort of covers everything else is called the labia majora and they're also sometimes called lips. You've already noticed that a little bit of hair has started growing on this part and above it, and in the next few years, even more hair will grow there, which is a normal sign that your body is maturing.

Inside the labia majora are smaller lips that surround the opening to your vagina—these are called the labia minora. Majora means big and minora means small—like major and minor. That's a useful way to remember which is which. Labia can be bigger or smaller—they vary a lot in different girls and women. The color of the skin here also varies a lot—in some women, it's the same color as the rest of their skin, but in others, it's more pink or brown.

The opening to your vagina is toward the bottom of the labia minora. At the top of the labia is a little spot that looks almost like a button, which is called the clitoris. The clitoris is covered by a little flap of skin called the clitoral hood. The clitoris has lots and lots of nerves packed into it, which is why it feels good when you touch it. And in between the clitoris and the vaginal opening is the urethral opening—which is where urine comes out. Your urine and the blood during your period come out of two different places.

Just inside the vaginal opening is a thin piece of skin called a hymen. The hymen doesn't usually stay there forever—sometimes it stretches out, and sometimes it breaks. It can break the first time a woman has sex, but it can also break or stretch out when girls are younger if they're really active—during horseback riding or gymnastics or dance and sometimes even from using a tampon for the first time. It sounds a little scary, and it might hurt when it happens, but it only happens once.

Urine and blood from your period are two things that come out of your body, but there are other liquids that you might notice coming out as well. Your vagina has a natural way of cleaning itself, so sometimes you might notice some white or gray discharge in your underwear. It may feel a little weird, but it's normal. Also, there are little glands in the vulva near the bottom of the labia minora that produce a bit of liquid when you get excited sexually; that liquid's meant to provide lubrication during sex, but it can also happen when you're just thinking about sex or even out of the blue. The important thing to know is that it's nothing to worry about.

Breasts

All of the changes of getting your period are part of the larger change that your body goes through called puberty—do you remember learning that word in school? We've already talked about one of the other changes that happen to your body during puberty, which is that your breasts begin to grow. Just like different women's vulvas look different, everybody's breasts look different too—they come in all different shapes and sizes. It can be frustrating if your friends' breasts are growing faster than yours because you may want to have them, too, but trust me, they'll grow! Most women like to wear a bra to help give them support, so when the time comes we can make a special shopping trip to the mall to get you a bra.

Other Body Changes

Other changes happen to your body during puberty as well. You'll grow hair in your armpits and on your legs, which many women choose to shave off. You can too—just let me know, and I can buy you a razor and show you how to use it. You'll also keep growing taller, and the shape of your body might change, and you'll start to look more like a grown-up.

I know that a lot of these changes might sound a little scary, but don't worry—they won't happen all at once! They usually take place over a few years, so it gives you time to get used to them and the new feelings you'll have too. And you know that if you feel scared or uncomfortable or have any questions about all these changes, you can always come to me for help—that's what moms are for!

Not all conversations can be well planned. Sometimes topics and issues will take you by surprise. Sometimes your child will bring something up that you haven't prepared for—some conversations will just barrel through the door. As children mature both physically and emotionally, other challenging themes will emerge that involve your child's body, emotions, and desires—we will address some of these topics, such as crushes, body image, harassment, and bullying in Chapter 6.