

TOPIC: Navigating the “Birds and the Bees” Talk (*Talking About Sex*) *July 2017*

Micro Training Course Developed by
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INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOSTER PARENT TRAINING CREDIT:

- *Read through this self-study.*
- *Fill out the “CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING” Questionnaire*
- *Return to ACRF for 1.0 hour of training credit.*

Let’s face it. Talking about S E X with our kids is uncomfortable, embarrassing, and sometimes awkward. The truth is though, if you don’t have that conversation with them, they are left on their own to find answers. As a result, kids are more likely to seek that information out from friends, the internet/social media, or other sources that may put them at risk of harm. All children and youth need a trusting, caring adult to provide them guidance on sex and sexuality. Many youth in foster care, however, have reported not feeling safe and supported by their foster families when they have questions or need guidance if something has gone wrong.

This course will focus on managing yourself and recognizing how your own belief systems can help you and the children in your care feel less uncomfortable talking about the birds and the bees. In addition, some brief tips will be offered on how to navigate sex and sexuality topics with youth.

To start, you’re going to need the ability to manage yourself and your own emotions around topics that can be emotionally and morally complicated. Gauging your ability to talk about sex and sexuality without squirming, blushing, and making uncomfortable facial expressions and body language is a good place to start. Being aware of how talking about these subjects makes you feel is essential, as these feelings will be conveyed to any child you are talking to, intentional or not.

Suggestions for learning how to manage yourself:

- Practice conversations with a partner, a close friend, or in the mirror until you are comfortable and can keep neutral facial expressions and body language.
- Practice keeping the giggles at bay. Children and youth may not have the correct language, understand phrases, have the correct terms for body parts, or may mispronounce words. A caregiver who giggles can send a message that may cause the youth to feel embarrassed or ashamed.
- Practice using the correct terms for body parts. It’s important to use the correct terms, like penis and vagina, so that there is no confusion around slang terms and anatomy.

Once you’re comfortable with your ability to manage yourself on the outside, it’s time to address differing values and beliefs around sex and sexuality. Youth in care may have been exposed to, experienced, or engaged in sexual activity that may not line up with your values and belief system. You’ll need to explore your own feelings about these topics. Much like managing your emotions on the outside, your belief systems can send messages to youth in your care about whether or not you are a safe person to help them.

Questions to ask yourself and your partner (if applicable), about belief systems:

- Do your family and friends understand the importance of creating a safe, judgment-free environment for youth in your care?
- What messages do your home, faith community, and lifestyle say to a youth about how you feel about sex education, sexuality, or differing beliefs and opinions?
- If a youth is engaging in pre-marital sex, will you be able to provide them the support and sex education necessary to keep them safe while respecting their belief system?
- If a youth is gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered, or questioning, will you be able to educate yourself, seek out supports, and provide them with the sex education necessary to keep them safe without judgment?
- If the youth in your home has sexual knowledge and behaviors that are advanced for their age, will you be able to gently redirect, educate, and support this youth?

Now that you know how your emotions and beliefs set the stage for youth in your care to feel safe in requesting your guidance, let's address the actual "talk". The "talk" is not a one-time conversation that you can check off a list and be done. As youth grow and learn more about their bodies, emotions, and relationships, they will need the questions answered again at a developmentally appropriate level.

So when is the right time to start having "the talk"?

For young children, often the right time is when they ask you a question about sex or a sex related topic. It's important to answer children's questions honestly, at their developmental level, and to focus your answer on the question they asked. Children will tell you how much more information they need to satisfy their curiosity based on their follow up questions.

For pre-teens, discussions around puberty are a starting point and simply asking if they have any questions about their bodies or sex that they think you might be able to answer. You can also take opportune times, like when watching a television show together and a sex-related topic comes up to ask your youth if they have any questions about what they just saw.

For teenagers, developing a trusting relationship will be the basis for the timing of conversations around sex and sexuality. You can set the tone by initiating a conversation letting them know you will be there to support them, help answer questions, or help connect them to someone who can answer any question.

Finally, youth of any age, who have had a traumatic introduction to sex through sexual abuse or assault, need trusting adults to teach them healthy sexuality while not stigmatizing or shaming. We recommend the following publication for more guidance, as well as seeking the advice of mental health professional.

http://www.jaspermountain.org/promoting_healthy_sexuality.pdf