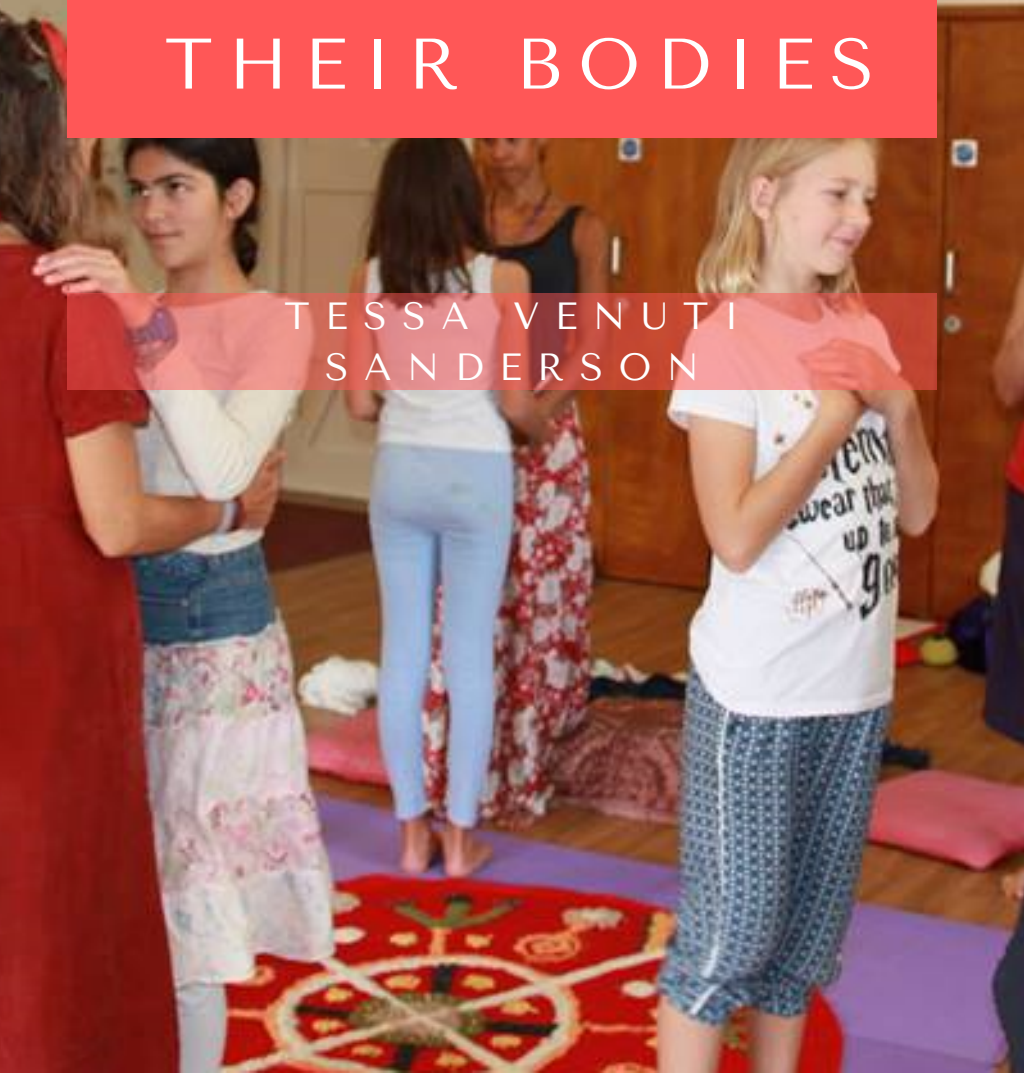


TOP 10 TIPS

TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT THEIR BODIES

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TOP 10 TIPS - TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT THEIR BODIES

WHY DOES IT FEEL SO DIFFICULT?

by Tessa Venuti Sanderson

At a certain age, children realise that talk about bodies is not like other talk. It's an emotionally charged topic. Adults fear messing up "the Talk", often because how to do it well was often not modelled to them when they were kids. I believe that you can change the story for your family.

Tip 1: Start young.

Answer questions as they arise while your child is curious rather than feeling awkward. Less is more. Start with one sentence and gauge their response. Drip-feeding information bit by bit is ideal.

Tip 2: Don't aim for perfect.

If we focus on getting the answer perfect, we'll probably end up saying nothing at all. The main thing is that you took their question seriously and kept the channels of communication open. Occasionally a "I'll tell you later" may be appropriate (think "What is sex?" asked in front of the grandparents over Christmas dinner...), as long as you do follow up with an answer later.

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Tip 3: Have back-up resources

Have a couple of books that are age-appropriate on hand, which you feel comfortable with. There are some great online resources, but you need to watch the material yourself first to check.

See my books for boys and girls at www.cyclicalwisdom.com/books



Tip 4: Reflect on your behaviour

What does your language and behaviour around body image, periods etc communicate? E.g. if you're making negative comments about your body, what message does that send? Or if you hide any trace of menstrual products, what is that telling your child?

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Tip 4: Open bathroom door policy

Obviously respect a child's wish for privacy as he or she gets older, but consider letting young children wander into the bathroom as you wee, shower or change menstrual products. They will be curious - the other emotions such as embarrassment or shame come from us.

Tip 5: Use day-to-day situations

Use other subjects in conversations to bring up more 'taboo' topics and trigger questions.

Perhaps you're talking about sport. For an older child, you can talk about the differences between men and women athletes' performances and segue into how a woman's menstrual cycle can affect this (e.g. the hormones through the month affect absorption of different nutrients. See Dr Stacy Sims fantastic book *Roar* on this).



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Source: Tea Consent Video

Tip 7: Model consent

An essential part of talk about bodies is consent. Reflect on how you show consent in your relationships with others. For example, do you hug someone you'd rather not just to be polite? What message does that send to your children? If your child doesn't want to kiss Uncle goodbye, can you give them other options and show that you respect their boundaries? Body sovereignty isn't always easy when negotiating teeth or hair brushing, eating 'enough' food or getting dressed. Giving options can help, such as outfit 1 or outfit 2 to wear.

For older children or to reflect on consent yourself, watch the 'Tea Consent' video (<https://vimeo.com/126553913>). NB The YouTube Version has a swear word.

Tip 8: Use correct terms

Use the actual body part words rather than euphemisms, which can lead to missed opportunities to safeguard children. In a case I read about, a child said to her teacher, "My uncle licks my cookie". The teacher thought it a little odd, but thought no more about it. Only some months later when the child said "My cookie is sore", the teacher suddenly realised what she was talking about. I'm sorry if this story is upsetting for you, but this is why talking straightforwardly about bodies is important.

Boys have a penis and testicles. Girls have a vulva (the external part) and vagina (internal passage).

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Tip 9: Enlist help!

I run a Red Tent - a women's circle - and I would be happy for any of those women to be an honorary auntie to my girls and be a safe person for them to ask about their bodies or relationships. As your child gets older, they may not always want to talk to a parent and so having other adults who provide a safe haven can be essential. This may be a teacher or activity leader. Support them to know what a respectful relationship looks like.

There are more and more events and groups forming to support positive self-image and body sovereignty for girls (more are needed for boys!). See Celebration Days for Girls, Rites for Girls or Pink Tents.

Tip 10: Acknowledge puberty

A rite of passage is an important event in someone's life. Traditionally, these have been marked by an individual or community ceremony. Puberty marks the journey into woman- or manhood and can take years of change.

Menarche (the first period) is a clear demarcation of this change, but rites of passage are important for boys too. Without them, young people sometimes create their own, more risky versions.

It may be that you give a small gift at an appropriate time to show that you've noticed the change. Or create an adventure together such as getting up to see the dawn, take a dip in the sea (a challenge in the UK!) or climbing a mountain.

Think of the amount of preparation that couples undertake for birth! Let's match that for puberty.

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NO MORE ANXIETY ABOUT "THE TALK"



I hope I've convinced you that it's an ongoing process to get healthy messages across to our children about bodies and relationships rather than an agonising build up to one big talk. Often it's not what we say that has the biggest impact but how we respect our own bodies that speaks loudest. This may or may not be good news for you!

Answering those out-of-the-blue questions from curious little children pave the way for talking about more tricky situations. It's never too late to start though. If your child is already feeling awkward about those sorts of conversations, get some books and let them know they can ask you any questions face-to-face or written down. Use everyday situations to talk about changing bodies or differences between bodies. Leave your menstrual products out in the bathroom (or even better have a box with products available to guests).

Tell stories about your own experiences within earshot: trying to use a tampon for the first time at school, what happened when a first kiss went wrong...

Good luck
Tessa

More resources are available at www.cyclicalwisdom.com. My three books are: *Ruby Luna's Curious Journey* (a fun introduction to girls' lower anatomy, circa 5-9 years), *Dante Leon's Curious Journey* (intro to boys' anatomy, circa 7-11 years) and *Ruby Luna's Moontime* (like Adrian's Secret Diary for girls 10-12 years).