S11E8 - Let's Talk About Sex — The Parent Guide

I want to start today by asking you to cast your mind back to whenever you had sex education in school—the lesson, or the lessons, that you were lucky enough to get, if you got more than one.

Maybe it was a diagram on a board. Maybe it was a video. Maybe it was a teacher who looked like they'd rather be anywhere else on Earth.

The giggling. The burning embarrassment. The biological terminology delivered in a tone that suggested none of this was to be discussed outside this classroom.

And then think about what that lesson actually covered, because I've asked this of many parents and in schools, and the answer is almost always the same.

It covered how a baby was made. The sperm meets the egg. The mechanics of reproduction. Maybe some mention of contraception, delivered quickly and without much detail. Maybe a brief appearance of something called an STI that sounded very alarming and wasn't discussed further.

What it almost certainly did not cover was this: what sex actually is.

What it feels like to want to have sex. What it feels like not to. What it looks like when it's healthy, mutual, and good. What pleasure is and why it matters. What the difference is between sex that someone genuinely wants and sex that someone goes along with because they don't know how to say no, or because they've learnt from the culture around them that this is just what happens.

The mechanics were covered. The human element wasn't.

And now, guess what? You're a parent. Somewhere in your house, there is a teenager who needs that human version—the one that goes beyond the biology—and you're not sure you have it to give because nobody explained it to you.

Today, we start there, with what sex actually is.

Not the mechanics—they probably have those—but with a fuller picture, the one that actually protects them.

I'm Ashley Costello. This is *The Resilient Kid Podcast*, and this is *Let's Talk About Sex: The Parenting Guide*.

So, we usually start with a story, and we will in a moment. But that image I just conjured up, I want to give you a snapshot of what mine looked like at school.

So, I went to a Catholic school, so already there are issues with that. Sex education had just come in, really, in Catholic schools, but it was very much cloaked in religion and religious beliefs.

So we knew that we were going to have this lesson. Our parents knew that we were going to have this lesson. But it was cloaked with God. It was cloaked with... I don't think we'd actually seen any genitals at all. The opposite sex would have come as a surprise to everyone in that classroom.

And we were basically told that sex was something that you did if you loved another person after you were married. There was a kind of loosening up of that, but there was definitely a religious element to it, and I think it was actually put out by the diocese.

I think the diocese had specially commissioned these lessons. So not only did we have a lack of detail, but we had this huge bag of guilt about any kind of thoughts about wanting to have sex, or any of the feelings that came with that, because we wouldn't have been married.

So, yeah, it was really embarrassing and really confusing.

Now, luckily, my mum was quite liberal. Not that I'd had a particularly detailed conversation with her. I've told you before in previous episodes I'd got a book.

However, my mum was very much of the view that, before you get married, you need to live with somebody, and that, thankfully, was really good for me to have that alternative view.

However, that wasn't the school view. It wasn't the Catholic Church's view.

Okay, let us get into our parent story.

I want to tell you about a parent. I'm going to call her Gemma. She's 43. She's got a son called Tyler, who's 16, and she's got a younger daughter, Cerys, who's 13.

Now, she's warm. She's funny. She's devoted to her kids.

By her own honest account, she's entirely unprepared for this kind of conversation.

The kind of thing she'd say to me was:

"Tyler's 16. I know things are probably already happening, or have happened. I've never talked to him about any of it. Not really. Not properly. I didn't get the talk myself. My mum was really loving, but she was also very private. Very old school."

"The message, basically: don't do anything till you're married. And here's a leaflet."

The leaflet was about reproduction. It didn't answer any questions I actually had.

So I said, "What questions did you have at that age?"

And she laughed. A short, surprised kind of laugh. The kind that comes when somebody has been asked something they weren't expecting.

And this is what she said:

"Whether what I was feeling was normal. Whether other people felt it too. What was it supposed to feel like? Not the biology, but the feeling. Whether you're supposed to enjoy it. Whether it was okay to enjoy it. Whether there was something wrong because I did.

I figured it all out on my own, which took a long time. And some of what I figured out was wrong. I don't want that for my kids. I just don't know how to do this."

And this is something that I hear from parents.

Now, often when we have a family session or we have a parent check-in when their kids are having one-to-one therapy, they don't come to me for the sex education talk.

It naturally evolves if they're that kind of pre-teen, or there's something around consent, or something around relationships. It's always a conversation that parents can bring up, and you can see they're embarrassed.

Anybody who knows me knows I'm quite open, quite straight, and so I will pick this up and guide them through it.

And it's through those side conversations. It's not the presenting issue, but it's those side conversations that are the whole reason we've done this podcast on sex ed, because I think it's so important that, A, we have the words, and B, that we know it's okay to have these conversations with our kids.

Because I'm going to tell you, if we're not having it, somebody else is, or something else, which is worse. But we'll come onto that.

So you can't give what you've not received. Not easily, and not without first going back to find the things that were missing for you and then deciding, deliberately and consciously, that you want to do it differently.

And that is what Gemma did, and that is what today's episode is here to help you do.

So let's have a look at the research of what sex actually is and why the fuller picture around it matters.

So I want to spend this segment doing something that might feel a little bit unusual for, essentially, this parenting education podcast.

I want to actually talk about sex. Not with euphemisms, but because it's one of the most important things I can model for you as parents or educators who are trying to have this conversation with teens.

And I want you to understand that you can have this talk directly, clearly, without the room catching on fire or you going blood red.

Let's just talk about it.

Because most of the definitions we were given—the one that involves penis entering the vagina, full stop—is, at best, incomplete and, at worst, effectively harmful.

It's incomplete because it excludes all the sexual experiences of a significant portion of people.

And it's harmful because it places penetration at the centre of the definition in a way that has real consequences for how young people understand their own experiences.

There's a professor called Kay Wellings, who leads the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles. It's the largest and most comprehensive survey of sexual behaviour in the UK.

It defines sexual activity across a wide spectrum that includes kissing, touching, oral sex, mutual masturbation, and penetrative sex of various kinds.

It's not a radical or progressive definition. It's just an accurate one.

And it matters for parents because it means that, when we talk to our teenagers about sex, we need to be talking about all of it, not just the one act our own education defaulted to.

Why does this matter practically?

Because a young person who's been told that sex means penetration may not recognise other sexual experiences as sex.

They may not apply the same framework of consent, of wanting, and of this being their choice to those other experiences.

They may have had experiences that feel significant and confusing, but they don't have the language because the word they were given doesn't seem to fit.

And language is the whole thing. It always is.

And I think there's two parts to that for me.

One, it's not just that they don't think they're having sex until it's penetration.

Actually, there is a lot that leads up to that, and, as teens, we want them to do that.

We want them to have that full range of experiences and know that they can stop on the way.

I think it's really important that it isn't just seen as this one thing—that you've never had sex until then.

So, for me, it's almost that kind of soft landing into sex, where they're exploring each other or themselves.

And I think that's really important.

So let me bring in something that's perhaps the most important thing for this episode.

Sex, when it's healthy, involves pleasure.

And pleasure, for all genders, isn't just a bonus or an afterthought. It's part of what makes sex healthy.

I know that might feel strange to say, listening as a parent or an educator, but I want you to sit with that for a moment because the absence of this in most sex education classes has caused enormous harm.

Now, I hope I do this lady justice. Dr Emily Nagoski, I think is how we say her name, whose research on human sexuality is amongst the most widely respected in the field, makes this point with great clarity.

She argues that sex education that focuses only on risk—on pregnancy, on STIs, on assault—teaches people that sex is fundamentally dangerous.

That the correct attitude towards it is vigilance and caution.

And that framing risk without pleasure, danger without joy, does not give young people a framework for healthy sexuality. It gives them a framework for fear.

What young people need, alongside all the important information about risk, about consent, about safety, of course, is permission to understand that sex, in the right context, with the right person, at the right time, brings something that human beings enjoy.

That wanting it is not shameful. That pleasure is not something that happens to one person at the expense of another.

That healthy sex is mutual, meaning both people want to be there, both people are enjoying themselves, and both people feel free to say stop at any point.

This is the conversation that Gemma never had. The one that would have answered the actual questions she was carrying.

The one that would have told her:

"What you are feeling is normal. It matters. You have the right to it. And you have the right to decide when, how, and with who."

One more piece of research I want to bring in here, because it sits underneath everything else we're going to say in this episode, is the Sex Education Forum's research on what young people actually want from sex education.

Gathered directly from young people themselves, it consistently finds the same things.

They want honesty.

They want to be treated like real people with real questions.

They want information about pleasure alongside information about risk.

They want someone to tell them what healthy looks and feels like, not just what is unhealthy and what to be afraid of.

They're not getting that from school, in most cases.

They're certainly not getting it from pornography, which is where most will go to try and find the answers to these questions if we don't have these conversations.

And I'm going to do a follow-up episode on that because it deserves a full conversation of its own.

So they need to be getting this from you.

And you are more equipped to give it than you think, because the things young people most need to hear are not complex. They're not technical. They're just human.

They're the things that Gemma needed to hear at 15 and didn't.

What you are feeling is normal.

Wanting is not something to be ashamed of.

Healthy sex is mutual. Both people genuinely want to be there.

Pleasure matters.

Your feelings about your own body and your own desires matter.

And you always have the right to say no and to have that respected.

That is the conversation.

That is all of it in its simplest form.

I'm going to give you top tips, of course, on how to talk to your teenagers about sex.

So, five things.

Here are five things that are going to help you have that conversation, even if you feel completely unprepared, even if you're starting late, even if the thought of it makes you want to go and find something very urgent to do in another room.

Or clean the toilet bowl with your own toothbrush rather than have this conversation.

But it's not about us. It's about them, and their safety, and their attitudes, and their questions.

One: Broaden your definition.

Before you talk to your teenager...

And do you know what I'd say? It's never too late to have these conversations.

Even if you've done the facts one and it didn't really go well, you can have this conversation.

It doesn't matter if they're at university. You can have these conversations.

So make sure your own definition includes more than penetration.

Sexual activity is a spectrum.

Your teenager's experiences, now or in the future, may not look like the narrow definition most of us were given.

So talk about all of it—not in one overwhelming conversation, but over time, in pieces, as the subject comes up.

Or bring it up.

Be a grown-up.

Two: Include pleasure in the conversation.

This is the one most parents skip.

Don't.

Young people need to hear that sex, in the right context, is something humans enjoy, and that their own desire and pleasure matter.

That healthy sex is not something that happens to them. It is something they participate in from a place of genuine wanting.

The absence of this conversation teaches them that their pleasure doesn't count.

And that lesson is dangerous.

Three: Give them a full picture of what healthy looks like, not just what unhealthy looks like.

Both people wanting to be there.

Both people feeling free to say stop whenever they want.

Both people's pleasure mattering equally.

Communication.

Actual conversation before, during, and after.

Healthy sex sounds like people checking in with each other.

It's not clinical.

It's human.

And it's respectful.

And it's what they need to hear.

Four: Tell them about your own gaps honestly.

Gemma's approach was the right one.

To be honest with her kids about what she hadn't been given.

"I didn't get this conversation when I was your age. Nobody talked to me about what sex was actually beyond the basics. I want to do something different for you, even if I don't get it right."

That honesty does not undermine you.

It builds trust with your kids.

It tells your teenager you're a real person who had real questions once, and that you're trying.

And it will open them up to coming back with bigger questions, or more questions.

Five: Make it a series of small conversations, not one big one.

This episode is not something you listen to and then go and deliver as a lecture at the dinner table.

It's something that gives you material for a dozen small moments.

A thing that comes up on TV. A question they ask in the car. A news story that gives you a way in.

Keep the channel open. Return to it often.

The conversation about sex, like the conversation about consent, is not a one-off thing. It's ongoing.

And ongoing is always better.

Okay, back to the story. Back to Gemma.

She went home. She thought about Tyler for a long time. About who he was—quietly funny, kind to his sister in the way that teenage boys probably rarely admit to, deeply private in the way that sixteen-year-olds mostly are—and about what she actually wanted him to know and what she wished someone had told her.

And then she did something brave.

She knocked on his door.

She didn't really have a plan. She didn't have notes.

She sat on the end of his bed and she said,

"I want to talk to you about something, and I'm going to be a bit rubbish at this because nobody talked to me about it. So bear with me."

He looked at her with the particular look of a sixteen-year-old whose parent is about to do something embarrassing.

"I want to talk to you about sex. Not the biology stuff. I know you know that. I want to talk to you about what it's like, what it feels like, and what to look for."

He said nothing.

But he also didn't leave.

And Gemma said she counted that as a win.

She talked for about ten minutes.

She told him healthy sex was mutual.

Both people genuinely needed to want to be there.

Both people's enjoyment mattered.

And that anyone who was pushing, or pressurising, or going quiet wasn't a sign to keep going.

She told him that wanting sex was normal and that it was nothing to be ashamed of.

And she told him that pleasure—his, or whoever he was with—was part of what made it healthy.

And then she said something she hadn't planned to say.

"When I was your age, I had no idea about any of this, and I figured it out on my own.

And some of what I figured out was wrong, and it took me years to get that right, and I don't want that for you."

Tyler looked at the ceiling for a long moment.

And then he said,

"Did you actually just say all that?"

"Yes," she said.

"Okay. Can I ask you something?"

She said, "Yeah."

He asked his question carefully.

Specific, but the kind of question that told her he'd been carrying it for a little while.

She answered it as honestly as she could, and she told him she wasn't sure about one part, but she would find out and come back to him.

She did.

And two days later, he nodded when she told him.

"It wasn't perfect. I got a bit tangled in the middle. I said things slightly wrong and had to correct myself.

But he asked me a question.

He had a question he'd been carrying, and he asked me.

And now, more than anything else, he knows he can."

And that's it.

That's the whole thing.

That's what we're doing.

We're opening this up for our kids.

So let's have a look at the bigger picture.

We zoom out and talk about what's at stake here.

We are living in a moment where young people's primary source of information about sex—what it looks like, what it feels like, what's normal and what isn't—is porn.

Not because they're seeking it out deliberately in most cases, but because it finds them.

On phones.

On tablets.

On social media feeds.

At ages when they have no framework yet for understanding what they're seeing.

And pornography, as we will cover in full, is not sex education.

It does not show mutual pleasure.

It does not show communication.

It does not show checking in.

It does not show the messy, human, sometimes awkward reality of two people figuring out how to be physical.

It shows performance.

And young people who build their understanding of sex from that performance develop expectations that can damage their own experience and their own relationships for years.

The Internet Watch Foundation is clear on this.

The Sex Education Forum is clear on this.

The research by Professor Kay Wellings and the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles is clear.

The antidote is not restriction alone.

The antidote is a fuller picture, given by a trusted adult, in a real relationship, in language that's honest and human, not clinical.

Gemma gave Tyler ten minutes at the end of his bed.

Ten minutes of honesty—imperfect and slightly tangled—that gave a question he'd been carrying somewhere to land.

Ten minutes.

That's all the research is asking of us.

Not a curriculum.

Not a perfect speech.

Ten minutes of being willing to be slightly uncomfortable in front of your teen, so they do not have to carry those questions alone.

You have ten minutes.

We all have ten minutes.

So I want to end this episode with a question that Gemma came in with:

"How do I give them something I've never had?"

And the answer, which I hope this episode has started to show, is that you don't have to have had it to give it.

You just have to be willing to go and find it.

To listen to podcasts like this one.

To read.

To ask.

To sit with your own discomfort, and sit with it long enough to find the words underneath.

And then knock on the door.

Not perfectly.

Not with a plan.

Not with scripts or notes.

Not with a guarantee that it's not going to be slightly awkward in the middle, because it probably will.

But just knock on the door.

Sit on the end of the bed.

Say,

"I didn't get this conversation. Bear with me."

And they will.

They might look at the ceiling.

They might ask a question that's surprised them.

They might not say anything at all.

But they will know.

They will know that you showed up for them and were willing to be uncomfortable for them.

And there's a version of this conversation available to them which isn't pornography.

Isn't playground rumours.

Isn't a leaflet about reproduction.

Or a Google search.

It lives in your house, behind your door, whenever they need it.

So go knock on their door.

That's *Let's Talk About Sex: The Parent's Guide.*

Thank you for being here.

I know it's not always easy, and I know this season we've been asking a lot of you because it's uncomfortable.

But that five or ten minutes of discomfort is going to change your children's view of sex.

And how fantastic.

What a gift to give them, rather than let them bumble through, as most of us probably have.

Coming up, we're going to turn the microphone directly to the young people.

The next four episodes are going to be addressed to them:

For boys.

For girls.

For teens on consent.

For older teens on sex.

Listen first, then share.

All the research, references, and further reading are in the show notes.

And if you want more on pornography, what it gets wrong, and how to talk to your teenager, that conversation is also coming up in a follow-up episode.

Subscribe so you don't miss it.

Check us out on Instagram, and come over to the website, which we're upgrading.

How amazing.

But until next time, go knock on their door.

Take care.

Good luck.