

## Military OneSource Podcast — Talking to Your Kids About Healthy Sexual Development

### Episode transcript

#### Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit [militaryonesource.mil](https://militaryonesource.mil).

#### Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody.

Today, we're going to have a conversation about the conversation, the talk, the birds and the bees, the conversation that parents have with their kids about sexual development. We're going to bring in some tips and some ideas, some things to think about when it's time to talk to your kids about healthy sexual development. So to do that, I want to bring in two guests who are really going to help us along with this conversation. First up, we have Julia Grimm. Julia is an independent trainer and consultant with the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth, and Natalie Gallo is a licensed professional counselor who works with children who have experienced problematic sexual behaviors. Natalie and Julia, welcome to the podcast.

#### Julia Grimm:

Thank you, Bruce. We're happy to be here.

#### Bruce:

Yeah. This'll be a really interesting conversation. I, like a lot of people my age, got the talk. The parents waited for me to attain a certain age, and then they sat me down. We had the talk, and we never spoke of it again. A lot has changed in the approach. I'll be really interested to hear from the both of you how that has changed and some of the advice that you have for parents.

#### Julia:

Yeah. Bruce, what you're describing is not at all an uncommon experience for those of us who are adults now and even kids today. We talk with parents all the time who think taking that approach is the way to go because that's what our parents did with us. So, we're happy to dispel some myths and give some parents some really applicable tips and guidance to do things a little differently.

**Bruce:**

All right. Great. When we talk about the talk, the big sit down, you guys see this very, very differently. This is not a talk, this is something that happens over the years. So how does this start? When do you first start talking about healthy sexual development with your child, and how do you do it?

**Julia:**

Yeah. That's a great question, Bruce, and one that a lot of parents, if they haven't asked it out loud, it's one that they're wondering. And we think about healthy sexual development as part of a child's overall development. We spend a lot of time on their physical, their emotional, their social development, their sexual development is a big part of that as well. We think about this happening in stages really across the lifespan. So early kids, zero to 6, we're teaching them eyes, ears, nose, mouth. We're also teaching them anatomically correct names for their private parts. We're teaching them penis, buttocks and vulva or vagina. And when we're teaching those parts, we're also teaching these are private parts of the body. These are parts that only primary caregivers are allowed to see or touch, and only for health and hygiene or a doctor for health and hygiene with a primary caregiver in the room in child developmentally appropriate language.

That changes, we build on that foundation, as kids get into those school age years. And we're talking about kids who are roughly 7 to 12. We're going to build on that foundation that we laid when they were very, very young, and we're going to talk about functions of those private parts. We're talking about reproductive functions of those parts, and we're doing that very matter-of-factly. We're talking about puberty. We're talking about how their bodies are going to change, and we're having that conversation before those changes start. Throughout this whole time period, we're also laying a foundation of talking about consent and boundaries that they get to say what happens to their bodies and when, and other people also have a say in what happens to their bodies and when.

Then, as we're moving into adolescents, we're talking about safe sex practices. We're talking about contraception, we're talking about STI, sexually transmitted infection prevention. We're talking about rules and laws that govern sexual decisions that we make with same-age partners. So really, it's a lifelong conversation that's going to happen multiple times at multiple time points. It's just going to sound a little different depending on the needs of your child at any given age.

**Bruce:**

Thanks, Julia.

Natalie, I want to get your thoughts on something because this is really talking about how we talk to our kids, which sets it up like we're going to have a conversation, but for kids who want to ask questions, how do we cultivate an environment where it's OK to

ask questions and if you have questions, here's how you might want to ask them. How do you teach that open line of communication to children?

**Natalie Gallo:**

That's such a great question, and I think so much of what Julia says really sets that foundation right if youth see their primary caregivers modeling calm, matter-of-fact conversations around these topics. If a parent is able to communicate openly about, "We can talk about your private parts, we can talk about these behaviors without judgment, without using language that shames." Just having those conversations, it allows those youth to know, "This is a person I can go talk to." The parents themselves create that open line of communication, and we know if youth have a safe adult that they know they can talk to without that adult becoming overly emotional or getting them in trouble for asking those questions, they're going to go to those people versus seeking out that information somewhere else like the internet, where we know there's a wide range of misinformation or unhelpful information that youth might have.

**Bruce:**

When we talk to kids about how to talk about sex, you mentioned before you use the terms and not metaphors and things like that. What is it that you're trying to avoid and how does that move the conversation along in a positive direction?

**Natalie:**

Yeah. That's a really great question. When we use slang terms or when families use slang terms, and those are the words that youth have for their own private parts, not only can that make conversations moving forward about sexual health and development and reproduction more challenging, but it also makes it harder for youth to get help when they need it. Imagine a kid who's at school and has having a medical problem or pain in one of their body parts and uses a slang term to a teacher who has no idea what they're talking about. And so, having those conversations and using that language, using those anatomically correct terms is safety prevention at every level for youth and for families, and avoiding language like dirty behaviors, that's nasty. Those are phrases that sometimes grown-ups use to describe behaviors relating to body parts in young children that then that language can reduce that youth's comfort in communicating about those topics.

It becomes something hidden. It becomes something that we don't talk about because it's gross versus, if a caregiver sees a behavior that they're not comfortable with or they want to change, talking about that as it relates to safety or family beliefs and values, instead of saying, "Kid, don't do that, that behavior is nasty." In our house, that's not a behavior that we do, or that's not a behavior that we do when we're out in public, or you need to be in your room if you're going to engage in that behavior. We're shifting language in a way that continues to keep conversations open without having youth shy away because they think they might get in trouble or having accurate language to get the right information that they need.

**Bruce:**

It sounds like what you're trying to set them up for is to be able to have open, honest, curious and healthy dialogue, and it seems like that is what puts them on a very, very positive path. Conversely, it seems like some of the factors you're trying to address, steering them clear of vulnerabilities and unhealthy behaviors.

**Julia:**

So, by laying a foundation of open and honest communication early and maintaining that open door communication policy on these topics, caregivers, parents have the opportunity to model positive communication skills. They have the opportunity to model information around safe decision-making by equipping kids to talk openly and honestly and without shame, and using anatomically correct names for body parts. Heaven forbid it's a parent's worst nightmare, but should something happen like sexual abuse or exposure to sexually explicit media that the child was not prepared for or stumbled into on the internet, we're equipping them to be able to share that experience without fear of being shamed, without fear of being punished, and to share that experience clearly so that they can get help and so that they can move forward from that.

Conversely, we're also setting up boundaries, prevention for kids to protect kids from inadvertently or mistakenly engaging in a sexual behavior themselves that could be problematic or harmful to someone else. It's really important that we're having these conversations so that kids are protected both from experiencing some problematic or abuse of sexual behavior and from engaging in that problematic kinds of sexual behavior.

**Bruce:**

OK. Let's bring the conversation into the military community or moving a lot. How can moving to a new community impact a child's peer groups and vulnerability factors, and what can be done to lessen that impact?

**Natalie:**

Yeah. That again, great questions. One of the trends we're seeing with youth these days is increased time online, an increased access to online relationships, and then subsequently challenges with kind of personal face-to-face social skills, and also just with increased time online, access to problematic, or unhelpful, or unsafe material, whether that be sexual or otherwise.

When we think about consistent moving and shifting in children and teens, social groups and social connectivity, the risk would be that those online behaviors might increase, or the lack of connection can make it more challenging for youth to have positive pro-social interactions, opportunity to continue to increase social skills, social communication, develop healthy relationships. So one thing for parents to consider, caregivers to consider as they have to move given the lifestyle of the military, is just that intentionality around seeking out positive pro-social things for their children and teens

to do, whether that's through their school, whether that's just through the community, whether that's intentionally creating time to allow their youth to make friends with folks in that new community where they've moved that are supervised, that are appropriate age-appropriate activities.

That intentionality from caregivers is going to be a key piece in supporting that and also increasing that developmentally appropriate need for online supervision. Allowing youth to maintain connections positively to folks where they've lived before is important and making sure that there's appropriate monitoring of all online behavior given that youth can unintentionally sometimes find themselves in riskier problematic situations given just the uncontrolled nature of the online landscape at times.

**Bruce:**

Yeah. Relating to the internet, how does access to the internet affect social and sexual development?

**Julia:**

Yeah. Interestingly enough, I actually spent an hour and a half on a webinar on this very topic this morning, and kids are reporting in recent surveys being online almost constantly, and they're seeking out health information from online sources and don't always have the digital media literacy to parse out what is reputable medically accurate information versus what an influencer might be sharing with them with the goal of clicks, or likes, or some monetary compensation. And so, it's really becoming increasingly important for parents to monitor the online environment as much as they're monitoring their child's physical environment. And again, this really just comes down to ongoing open conversation and dialogue between trusted adults and youth around how to find accurate, reliable, reputable sources of health information, anything from mental health to sexual health, and how to vet those sources.

We're also seeing kids increasingly turn to pornography as a source of sex education, and so having a really clear, direct, honest conversation about pornography, much younger than we might think we need to. We're talking with kids about pornography as early as 9, 10 and 11 years old. The reason for that being, that's the average age of exposure online. So, they need to know that this is an entertainment industry. It is not representative of healthy sexual behaviors. It is not representative of the consent that we want to see, and that it is rooted in fantasy and entertainment, and conversations around family values and reasons why that's inappropriate material for children and youth to be accessing or exposed to.

**Bruce:**

So, we've covered a lot of ground in this conversation, but I wonder if there are any other tips that you want to provide to parents when it comes to supporting their children's healthy sexual development?

**Natalie:**

I think you're right. We have given a ton of information in a very brief timeframe, but if families, caregivers, anyone listening to this can take away two or three main points, it's communication that's open. It's early, and it's often, it doesn't have to be perfect, but it creates those lines of communications that allows for increased comfort as time goes on. The more we talk about these things in safe environments, the easier it becomes. So, start early, continue those conversations often and be involved with your kids as possible. We recognize folks listening to this are incredibly busy, are pulled in a million different directions, but that supervision of online and physical environment, those positive friendships, opportunities for peer engagement, that's going to be really important.

And we know that these skills, just those two skills alone, are going to significantly increase the healthy child development and safe decision-making across the board because, if we can get comfortable talking about sexual health and development at a young age, all of those other important conversations are going to come so much easier. This is the toughest topic for a lot of families to talk about. If you can conquer this and get comfortable, all of those other conversations around healthy development, behavior growth are just going to come more naturally to your family, enhance safety in the future.

**Bruce:**

Thanks a lot, Natalie. Julia, any final words?

**Julia:**

Yeah. I think if there is nothing else that parents or even clinicians, providers, anyone listening to this, there's nothing else you take away from this conversation, it's really just to take a deep breath and while talking about sex and healthy sexual development and pornography feels really big and scary because of some of the taboo and the stigma around that, the skills that we're highlighting here are skills that generalize across the board.

Really similar to what Natalie said, we're talking about the same skills that help keep kids safe from making other non-sexual problematic decisions. We're talking about skills that keep kids safe from substance use, from falling in with inappropriate or dangerous peer groups. We're talking about skills that promote healthy development across the spectrum of a child's life and across developmental areas. So, communication, involvement, supervision and monitoring. And if you don't know the answer to something, it's OK to say, "You know what? I don't know, but let's look it up together." And then model for your youth, for your child, how to go about finding reputable medically accurate information. It's as much about process as it is content and just being honest and doing your best.

**Bruce:**

Julia and Natalie, you and your colleagues have been on the podcast a number of times really getting into this topic. We have links to other episodes on this topic that can really help to expand on the subject. So, Julia Grimm and Natalie Gallo, thanks for joining us today.

**Natalie:**

Thank you so much.

**Julia:**

Thank you, Bruce.

**Bruce:**

Absolutely. We want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We are a website, we're a call center, we're on social media, and we are a podcast. So, subscribe to us wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a whole range of topics to help military families as they navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.