

Teaching Children About Sex Without Shame: Lessons from Denmark

In Denmark, addressing children's curiosity is not something to shy away from. This is evident in the Danish children's book *For Those Who Ask Why: A Book About Bodies, Sex, and How Babies Are Made*, now available in English for the first time.

“Wet vagina’ is not the same as peeing in your pants.” The book's tone is humorous and straightforward, accompanied by simple, non-vulgar illustrations. The book is popular in Denmark, it has received positive attention in the media, been featured in several prominent articles, and cherished by Danish families for over a decade.

Should American parents embrace the Danish approach to parenting with this book? What are the pros and cons of addressing children's curiosity about taboo subjects like sexuality?

The creator of the book has no doubts. Ignoring children's curiosity about such a crucial topic is a serious oversight. She reflects on her own childhood, where avoiding the subject or using confusing metaphors didn't provide clarity. As a result, children are left to figure it out on their own, missing the opportunity to learn from a trusted parent.

According to the creator, it's not as difficult as it seems to talk about these topics when paired with simple infographics, straightforward facts, and a good dose of humor.

The following is translated and updated form an article in Danish published in the Danish newspaper “Politiken”.

“I saw a gap in the market. The books already available in this genre are aimed at much older children. They focus on reproduction and often take on a somewhat solemn or formal tone. Additionally, there's nothing about children's own sexuality, but children do have a sexuality and are fascinated by naked bodies,” says the creator, Marie Christiansen.

She believes that we are currently experiencing a growing taboo around children and sex, even as children are exposed to sexualized content everywhere in the media.

“It's my impression that people have become afraid to talk about sex with children, maybe because there's been so much focus on pedophilia in recent years. For example, there's absolutely nothing about children's sexuality in early childhood education programs, so many educators are surprised when children ask questions or rub against each other,” she says, adding:

“Furthermore, there's now a debate about whether children should be allowed to look at naked people in swimming pools. And you hardly see anyone topless at the beach anymore. In Denmark, topless bathing was common in the 1970s but has become less widespread in recent decades. There is a trend toward increased “neo-puritanism” and reluctance to show bare skin. This book is also a reaction against the media's homogenization of bodies, where everything is

tucked in, tightened up, covered in foundation, and filled with filler and silicone. It's important for children to learn that our bodies look different—some have hair, others have long labia or a very small penis.

Therefore, the book states:

"Both adult men and adult women have a lot of hair on their bodies. Children do not," followed by illustrations of men with hair on their backs, men with hair all over their bodies, and men who are completely clean-shaven.

Banana-shaped or sagging

There is also a wide array of breasts in all shapes and sizes: asymmetrical, small, large, silicone-enhanced, sagging, banana-shaped, and so on.

Sexologist Josefine Eiby writes in the foreword:

"I see many young girls who are shocked by their bodies and their sexuality. They think women don't have hair, they think their breasts are too uneven, their labia are too large, and that something is wrong with them if they feel more sensation in their clitoris than in their vagina."

The Little Button

The topic of the clitoris is an important one, according to the two women behind the book. That's why the book provides an educational explanation about the little button at the top that feels good to touch.

Previously, Josefine Eiby, a schoolteacher and sex education instructor, would draw a clitoris herself in her books and on her diagrams.

"We haven't found a single educational book for children that openly talks about the clitoris. I think I could have really used that information when I was a child instead of learning about it in 8th-grade sex education. The clitoris is what girls begin to experiment with, so it's important they hear about it. It's a bit easier with boys. When my son was no more than 10-month-old he knew he had a penis because it's just there, dangling," says Marie Christiansen.

But isn't this too much, or too abstract, for small children to hear about?

"It's a topic that's difficult to fully understand when you're very young. You probably need to be about five years old to really grasp the book. But even before that, kids can flip through it and look at the drawings. The key is to take it out and read the chapters that match the child's developmental stage. The most important thing is to take children's questions and curiosity seriously and talk to them about sex without crossing your own or the child's boundaries."

The book also explains, in broad terms, that sex isn't just about making babies but mostly about feeling good. Though:

"Not all adults find sex enjoyable. Some would rather play electric guitar."