

**FIVE HUNDRED QUESTIONS  
KIDS ASK ABOUT SEX  
And Some of the Answers**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frances Younger grew up and graduated from high school in the mid-Michigan city of Lansing. She attended both Stephens Junior College for Women and Oberlin College, graduating in 1942.

In 1942, she married a young attorney, Paul Younger, and accompanied him to several military posts where he was assigned duty. Settled in Lansing after the war, she became a homemaker for their three children, part-time vocal teacher and assistant to her husband in his political campaigns. Over the next fifteen years, he was judge, prosecuting attorney, and state senator.

In 1968, she graduated from Michigan State University with a master's degree in secondary counseling. She accepted a position as teacher in growth and development (sex education) with an area school district and continued in this position until her retirement in 1983.

In 1977, she was elected a member of the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT). For several years, she taught parenting classes for the adult night school and Lansing Community College. At the community college, she developed and taught classes in Female Sexuality and in social skills and sexuality for the adult handicapped.

She is presently assistant for workshops sponsored by Michigan State University and Ingham Intermediate School District. These workshops are approved and required by the state of Michigan, for all teachers who are assigned or are teaching sex education in their own district.

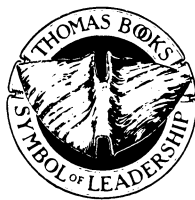
**FIVE HUNDRED QUESTIONS  
KIDS ASK ABOUT SEX**

**And Some of the Answers**

**Sex Education for Parents, Teachers  
and Young People Themselves**

*By*

**FRANCES YOUNGER, M.A.**



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## INTRODUCTION

“**W**hat kinds of questions about sex do kids ask?” “How would you answer a question like that?” When the subject of sex education comes up, these are the two most frequently asked questions which parents, teachers and others concerned with sex education ask.

This book is designed for parents, teachers and young people themselves. It is based on the premise that sexual expression is a wonderful way that people can show affection and love for each other, despite the many conflicts and problems it may cause for the young and not-so-young. I think it will be especially useful for those people who desire to talk frankly to children and teenagers in their care, but are still hesitant and embarrassed because they themselves have not experienced straightforward and frank discussions of sexual information. Although other valuable books on sex education are available which advocate frankness and honesty, mine provides parents and teachers with examples of precise and no-holds-barred responses their children will understand.

This book is based on fifteen years of experience in teaching young people about sex, in training sex education teachers, in raising three children and in caring for three grandchildren. Out of my own experience, and in consultation with many colleagues and friends, I have reviewed close to 2,500 actual questions asked by children and teenagers from kindergarten through high school and selected those questions which young people most frequently ask.

Some people may question the need for frank discussions of sex with young people, given how often sex is openly portrayed in the mass media. Yet, although often very explicit, most depictions of sex are very unrealistic and suggest that sex has no consequences beyond the pleasure and romance of the moment. Rarely do popular portrayals suggest that there might be more to sexual feelings than intense physical attraction. They almost always lack any sense of responsibility. Television and films often arouse and exploit our young people's sexual impulses with little

regard for the resulting teen pregnancies, unwanted children or deeply hurt feelings.

To be sure, the so-called “sexual revolution” has made it easier for us to speak openly and frankly about sex. Nevertheless, the impact of this “revolution” is much overrated. Over the years, I have seen how poorly informed about sex young people are. At the beginning of the 1990s young people ask the same questions that they did in 1967, and reveal the same confusion and misinformation. What has changed is that now they ask more “advanced” questions at younger ages.

Unfortunately, what has not changed enough is our willingness as adults to provide honest responses and correct information to our children. Strong sexual feelings are a daily reality for young people, as any adult who thinks back to her or his teen years will remember. Yet so often parents and teachers try to pretend that they don’t exist or that they pose no difficult problems for our children. Perhaps this is because our own youthful sexual feelings were troubling, associated with anxieties we would just as soon forget. Because of the reluctance of mature adults, I have seen countless young people seriously damage their potential for happiness and success. Sometimes they have not learned how to control these feelings, but frequently they are simply misinformed about the basic facts of how a woman becomes pregnant and how pregnancy may be avoided. Because parents, teachers, counsellors and ministers are often unwilling or uncomfortable to discuss sex in a frank and honest manner, our children fill in the vacuum with highly distorted pictures of sex derived from television and films.

Whether we like it or not, our young people today will learn about sex at a young age. It is up to us to see to it that they do not learn from the mass media that sex involves no responsibility, can be enjoyed fully without any commitment or emotional involvement, and has no consequences. One of the most difficult problems is to respond to the whole person’s concerns, not just to the realities of his or her sexual desire. It is often easier to give technical information about sexual activity and sexual development than it is to respond clearly to the complex ways that sexual feelings are involved with other feelings—the desire for emotional intimacy with a member of the opposite sex, the wish to impress one’s friends and to “belong,” the struggle for independence from one’s elders. Ultimately, these are all issues each young person must work out for himself or herself. I have found that young teenagers act responsibly, if we acknowledge the reality and power of their feelings and if we show



them our confidence in their ability and desire to understand and take charge of their feelings and express them responsibly. It is very normal for teenagers to want to experiment: to hug, to kiss, to stroke each other's sexual areas and to have sexual intercourse. It is my deepest conviction that by acknowledging and discussing these desires openly, adults are able to help teenagers engage in responsible sex in which the partners treat each other with respect. It is our very **unwillingness** to be forthright that leaves our young people feeling pressured to have sexual intercourse in order to impress their friends or appear "grown-up," to pretend they already know all there is to know about sex.

I have set down the questions in much the same form that pre-teens and teenagers ask them, and provided clear, unambiguous and comprehensive answers to each. I have kept the slang or "street" terms in the questions because—like it or not—these are the words youngsters most easily understand. One of my colleagues relishes an incident in which a child, well schooled in the polite, technical language of sex, asked, "I know all about the penis, the vagina, the testicles and the ovaries; but what does my dickie do?" Youngsters have heard the slang terms for years, and are usually more comfortable using them than the correct terms. By not reacting with shock or disapproval to a youngster's use of such terms, you will make it easier to establish trust with her or him. In my answers, I try to lead the youngster to learn and use the more correct terminology. I have found that after continual repetition, the youngsters themselves begin to prefer them to "street" language. I have tried to keep repetition to a minimum. But some repetition is necessary, both to reinforce the young person's knowledge and to enable him or her to connect one piece of information with another.

In answering questions it is important to remember that questions may express not only a young person's curiosity, but also his or her anxiety as well. Many spoken questions often contain the unspoken questions, "Am I normal?" "Is this normal?" Someone might ask merely out of curiosity, "What decides if a baby will be a boy or a girl?" On the other hand, someone may ask because of anxiety, "Will you die from masturbating?" Sometimes a question may appear to merely express curiosity, while in reality the young person is seeking to put to rest some anxiety. One example might be, "At what age to boys (or girls) begin to mature sexually?" The person may seem merely to be curious, but in reality is wondering whether he or she has something wrong with him or her because sexual development has not yet begun. The question "Can

you tell a homosexual by his or her looks?” can mean that someone has been called homosexual by a friend or class mate, or that the individual is concerned about some supposedly “abnormal” physical characteristic. In most of my answers, I have tried to include reassurance as well as information. Sometimes a youngster may seem to be asking one thing when she or he is really asking something quite different. For example, “When is sex enjoyed the most?” may mean, “What situations make sex most enjoyable?” or “At what age does a person enjoy sex the most?” or “What is needed in a relationship for sex to be most enjoyable?” Sometimes a youngster of any age may ask questions to which you think he or she already knows the answers. The youngster is probably seeking reassurance, or may be testing you to see whether you are willing to discuss an embarrassing subject frankly and fully. In using this book, remember that young people need to be reminded constantly that they are normal, that their desires are healthy, that their behavior is common, that truly abnormal feelings or physical problems are rare.

Of course, this does not mean that you approve of that behavior, or that you think the young person should act on her or his desire. How you answer questions of what is right and what is wrong depends a great deal on your relationship with the young person in question. A teacher or school counsellor will probably be more hesitant to state absolutely what is proper and what is improper than a parent or a minister. However, even if you are absolutely sure what you think is morally correct in a given situation, it is usually better to postpone setting out absolute principles until you have listened sympathetically to the young person’s viewpoint. As experienced adults, it is easy to think that we should be obeyed unquestioningly. Experience shows that young people, especially teenagers, often feel quite differently about this! Often it is best to respond to a question such as, “Is it OK for an unmarried teenager to have intercourse?” with a question like, “Well, what do you think?” Instead of “laying down the law,” show the other person that you respect and are eager to hear his or her opinion; you may be surprised to find that it agrees with yours. Even if it doesn’t, a teenager anxious to assert her or his independence will be far more likely to take your opinion seriously if you accord her or him the same respect. Remember that a young person may take a strong stand against you one day, only to completely change his or her mind the next.

The answers given are only suggestions; *they are not meant to be taken as the only right answers*. When you read them, you may find

yourself thinking, “I would never answer that question that way.” That’s just fine—it means that you have already begun to work out your own answers. You need to be comfortable with the explanations you give children in your care. Moreover, if you give an answer that you are obviously uncomfortable with, the child will sense that you don’t really believe what you are saying. You are probably better off avoiding a subject which you cannot discuss comfortably. But remember, it is usually wishful thinking to believe that, if you don’t discuss a sexual practice which you find objectionable, the young person will not find out about it. Most of the time, if you don’t respond to a child’s question with enough accurate information, he or she will almost certainly try to learn more from friends—friends who are often badly misinformed. Too much information is probably better than too little, provided that you make it clear what your own feelings are about the sexual practices you are describing.

The book is divided into six chapters covering six topics related to sexuality and growing up. Within each topic, the questions are given roughly in order of progressing complexity and sophistication—it is not necessary (and probably not appropriate) to explain to an eight-year-old what an orgasm is or what forms sexual contact may take, when the general facts about how babies begin, where they develop and how they are born is all the information the child is seeking. Teenagers are more interested in the problems which sexually colored relationships raise, while these problems are usually of scant interest to younger children. Of course each reader of this book will have to adjust his or her answers to the sophistication and level of curiosity of the particular individual he or she is addressing. However, here are some general guidelines.

Children in pre-school and lower elementary school usually live very much in the present. Their curiosity about sexual behavior is not easily aroused, even when there are pet animals around who may engage in sex. Of course, they are curious about body parts and the differences between female and male anatomy, and frequently seek assurance that their bodies are normal. When questions concerning sexual intercourse or “where babies come from” arise, with young children I usually stress the role of intercourse in creating new people, not the pleasurable aspects. Many children, when they learn what sexual intercourse is, will ask “Why would anyone ever want to do that?” (I explain that it is necessary to make babies.)

Often a simple, one-sentence answer will satisfy a young child’s curiosity.

It is important, however, to make it clear that you welcome the child's questions and will do your best to answer them. Young children can easily sense when their sexual questions are not welcomed, and can quickly learn that it is unacceptable to ask about the subjects of sex and their own bodies. If an answer is too complicated for them, they will take what they can get out of your answer. Later, they often come back with further questions to clear up what they found confusing—provided you have made it clear that further questions are always welcome. By reading stories to your children that have instances of teasing, hurt feelings, fighting you can stimulate many kinds of questions. Your local public or school librarian can be very helpful here.

**Children in the upper elementary school grades** increasingly ask questions about their development and about pregnancy and child birth. Their interest in sexual relationships and activity also increases. Many children at this age level are already curious about sexual intercourse and about homosexuality. Of less interest are birth control and sexually transmitted diseases (venereal diseases), with the exception of AIDS, which is frequently in the news. The child is usually seeking reassurance rather than detailed information. For some reason, fifth- and sixth-graders have a seemingly endless fascination with birth defects.

**Children of middle-school (junior high school age)** continue to be interested in physical development, pregnancy and child birth. Heredity is also of interest, as are sexual relationships and activity. Intercourse is a very frequent subject of lively interest. But at this age, there is much variation from child to child. Some seem merely to be curious, while for others the questions have more immediate significance as they become aware of their own sexuality. As they advance through these years, and their physical maturity is completed, their interest generally shifts from concern about bodily changes to concern about their sexual feelings and about relationships. They may begin to have close relationships with members of the opposite sex. Many of their questions show that they are beginning to regard sex as part of a relationship with another person, rather than just an activity you “do” like ice-skating.

Sexual practices also become an increasing area of concern toward the end of the middle school years. Here it is especially important to be willing to listen to the youngster's point of view. You must be willing to accept that young people—even your own children—may have different values from yours. But a general guiding principle I often put forth is,

Anything is all right in the area of sex as long as it does not hurt you or hurt the other person, and as long as it does not offend you or the other person.

This definition stresses responsibility to oneself, to one's sexual partner and to persons with different values.

It is especially important at this age to be aware of youngsters' needs for reassurance and to continue to let them know that you welcome their questions, and will try to answer them as honestly and fully as you can. For girls, menstruation is often a source of anxious concern, although this concern usually subsides once menstruation has actually commenced. Many young people, believe it or not, are already considering whether to have intercourse at this time, usually under pressure from friends. Some youngsters are already "street-wise" about sex, and have begun to experiment sexually. These children are especially prone to absorbing a great deal of misinformation about sex. So it is best to bring the risks involved to their attention. As they get older, their interest in birth control and sexually transmitted diseases increases. Youngsters of this age and on through their later teen years often want to hear that there is a form of contraception that is absolutely safe. When you tell them that only abstinence is 100% safe, they may think you are withholding information from them. It is important to keep reiterating this point. Similarly, they do not want to hear that teen sex during menstruation is **not** safe, or that interrupting intercourse or only placing the penis near the vagina are not reliable ways to prevent pregnancy. Although questions about sexual diseases may not be very frequent for children just entering middle school, it is a good idea to bring them to young people's attention. Here, as in drug problems, scare tactics are not usually effective. It is better to give the facts as simply as possible, and then invite the young person to explain how he or she would avoid the risks involved.

Children of this age are also very interested in heredity. This provides a good opportunity for you to bring up the drug problem by discussing the effects of illegal drugs on babies growing in the womb. At this age and for long after, young people often have the feeling that "nothing bad is ever going to happen to me," and this is as good a time as any to begin to challenge that assumption—not only with respect to drugs, but with respect to pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases as well.

Many high school students are fully developed physically or will finish their growth before graduation. Many of these individuals have

lost interest in the academic side of school (witness the high dropout rate). There is great importance placed on “going steady.” Unfortunately this locks the young person into a relationship and keeps him or her from experiencing relationships that would be helpful in his or her development.

Having a peer group to belong to is also important to the teenager. Often it seems that the only time the student is truly alive is when he or she has a chance to meet his or her friends between and after classes.

Parents say their older teenagers ask very few questions about sex, and that it is difficult to start a conversation with them. The teenagers often seem defensive about many things. Taking a situation from television or the movies and asking the teenagers for their opinions may help begin a discussion. Listening to their opinions and thanking them afterward for sharing their opinions with you may be a novel experience and make it easier for them to open up next time.

Sometimes trust must be established all over again on a more mature level. You could offer to go to the Planned Parenthood clinic with your teenager(s) to learn about contraceptives. Your teenager will probably not wish you to accompany him or her but just the fact that you offered will demonstrate your confidence in him or her to make a good decision. One parent told me that she discussed contraceptives with her daughter (in fear and trembling) and when she had finished, her daughter said, “Well, now I know so nobody can talk me into doing something I don’t want to do.”

High school students also hold the belief that “nothing bad is ever going to happen to me.” Teenagers’ self-esteem still needs a good deal of bolstering. They feel grown up but are not allowed to be adults. As a parent, try to find five things every day that you can compliment your teenager about. Tell your daughter or son over and over what you like about his or her looks and what he or she is doing. You may think the teenager will feel you are overdoing it, but he or she never does. Studies show that people with high self-esteem make better decisions for themselves. We all function better in life when we feel good about ourselves.

Questions from older teenagers are usually about relationships. There are many questions about respect, manipulation, power struggle and using or being used by another person. All of these complicated situa-

tions are very puzzling to a teenager. Sol Gordon has a book about “lines” that can be very helpful as well as entertaining. Soap operas are full of situations that are destructive in relationships—some teenagers actually believe this is the way a person is supposed to act in a relationship.

FRANCES YOUNGER





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**FIVE HUNDRED QUESTIONS  
KIDS ASK ABOUT SEX  
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**BODILY DEVELOPMENT**  
**AND SEXUAL MATURATION**

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