



Spotlight issue

Do we raise our children as we were raised?

The purpose of the spotlight issues series is to highlight themes or topics which have arisen across parental contributions. While these issues are reported across chapters, these short papers highlight key aspects for further reflection.

Across our small group chats parents remembered growing up, and how their parents had supported their learning about their bodies, about puberty, about relationships or sex. For some this was positive and supports them as parents now.

You know I follow what I learned from my mum, the way I was brought up. She was open, we could go to her and talk. She was a good mum, so I think what my mum would do.

(Group chat 22)

We raise our children as our parents raised us. Of course, every household is different. But we can choose in each household how we do this.

(Group chat 1)

We also heard from parents about less positive experiences, and commitments to parent differently for their child.

No, I don't bring my children up the way I was brought up. No, the opposite. Well maybe not completely opposite. But certainly, I'll talk about bodies and emotions, and those were taboo subjects when I grew up.

(Group chat 27)

Someone said to me, you know, tell stories from your own childhood. You know that isn't always possible, it wasn't positive for me. My parents staunch religious views really affected how they communicated about things with me and my brother. I had to navigate that experience of puberty all on my own. I heard things from friends and tried to work things out. I wanted it to be different for my children. But I know, however much we want to be different, these difficult memories are in our bodies, as

I support my children I remember those things again. I suppose you have to acknowledge the harms done to you, what didn't go well for us, maybe it wasn't their fault, but it doesn't serve us well now as parents if we don't work this out.

(Group chat 24)

We have heard that when a nursery or school contacts a parent with information about nursery or school-based learning, this can prompt memories of growing up and learning about our bodies.

I remember the nursery said that they had done some training, and they'd be using the correct words for body parts, and I was like, oh god they're going to be saying vagina to my daughter, am I going to have to speak like that, she's just wee. And then I just started to remember what it was like when I was wee, with my mum and dad, it was so taboo to talk about sex or anything to do with your body.

(Group chat 26)

When parents have not had positive experiences, or when their own parents did not support learning, they can worry about how to be that positive role model and educator for their child.

Nobody told me about growing up, and about sex, my mother never mentioned it, nothing about periods, we were 'good Catholics', wasn't discussed. So now I need to have somewhere to discuss this, to help me build my confidence to discuss it. It was so drilled into me not to talk about it, how am I supposed to know how to do it now? I think I'll struggle.

(Group chat 38)

Across our small group chats, women talked about their experiences of first periods, these were often distressing; they want this to be different for their daughters.

I wanted my daughter to understand that she will have periods, so that she has no worries about it happening. When I started my period, no one had ever told me it was going to happen. I knew nothing. I thought I was bleeding out my bum, I thought I was dying.

(Group chat 12)

You know I struggle with certain things, with certain words, because my mother was like 'oh we don't talk about that'. So, when I had my period, I thought I was dying. With my kids now, I'm like, this is going to happen, I'm not saying it's a nice experience, but my daughter knows I go through it, she will go through it, and I'll be there for her. Now I know to question things, why would we be keeping such a thing secret?

(Group chat 26)

My children are open, they ask me. I try not to get embarrassed. I was brought up Catholic, in a Catholic school, and I was very conservative in front of others, how I spoke or didn't speak about things. But with my children I think they are very open, which is good for me because I try to shy away. Like when my daughter had her first period, she just came to me and told me what she needed. So, I think I am lucky that my children are open. They don't need to hide things, and I have learned to become more open, because that is certainly not how I grew up. My mother didn't even know when I had my first period. I have broken that cycle.

(Group chat 34)

I was told nothing about growing up, about having periods. It started when I was 8, I thought I was dying. So, my children, boys and girls know about this stuff.

(Group chat 27)

I have a different approach to doing things, not the way I was raised. We didn't have talks about healthy friendships or relationships, so I try to do that with my daughter. She's at an age where unhealthy relationships might develop, so I try to be open, I talk to her about everything – about dating, about periods – because I was never taught. I got pregnant very young, it's my motto now, I have open talk with every young person I know in my family. I don't want them to be raised in fear, the way I was. When I was having my period, I had to hide, so that no one could see me. I didn't even know how you got pregnant, where babies come from. My girls will know.

(Group chat 23)

Many parents have spoken about a strong commitment to do things differently for their child.

I know now what I needed and wasn't provided.

(Group chat 24)

Our experience is growing up without parents talking about things like menstruation. Then you get to this point, and you are the parent. Which way do you go? The way of your parents and not talking. Or do you start talking about it? Because I know now that if I don't talk to my children, someone else will. And that might be stuff you don't want them to be influenced by. And with sexuality, it starts very early, and we need to think about what and who is influencing how our child thinks about this.

(Group chat 29)

I try to be open myself. I don't have examples from growing up of this, this is me doing it differently. Whether it's talking about her body changing, periods, or emotions. I'm very aware that these teenage years are maybe a time when it's not cool to talk, so I give her space.

(Group chat 19)

I didn't grow up in Scotland, my parenting is not consciously informed by the cultural norms of my childhood, I didn't have great parenting models, so I had to research that myself when I thought I wanted to be a parent. One of the things I realised for me would be having a sex positive family, that wasn't my experience, but cultivating that environment is based on demystifying this, and not having such an adult perspective on talking and thinking about it, so, in my house, with kids of all ages, we talk about sex, so no not the act of sex but all the things around it, boundaries, consent, emotional engagement, other people's feelings, to be comfortable, to be playful in ways that's reciprocated. Those things are part and parcel of growing into a person who has a maturity that leads to a sexual encounter.

I am very concerned about smart phones and pornography.

(Group chat 17)

As has already become clear, for some mothers doing things differently is especially important for their daughters.

She knows her rights, she knows about contraception, she is aware of her own femininity and her rights. There is nothing in our culture that says she can't make her own decisions, and how she is going to lead her life. I don't bring them up like I was, being told 'you have to do this, you have to do that'. She can make her own decisions about how she wants to lead her life once she is a grown up.

(Group chat 34)

Ideally, when I think about my own sex education it was so basic, the act, we didn't talk about consent or pressure or gender issues or diversity. It gave a message that it was just a physical thing. I want my girls to have a balanced appreciation of how sex fits within relationships, so that they feel free to make choices they want to make without fear of judgement or any other consequences that are harmful.

(Group chat 10)

When parents think about their upbringing and their child's learning now, there is a strong commitment to the quality of parent and child communication.

The mother I am to my children is not the mother that my mother was to me. Definitely not. I love being their friend. I get respect, but I know what's going on in their lives. I am part of the changes going on for them. They do respect me so much, but I am big enough to say when I am wrong, to say I'm sorry. For an African parent, that's quite a thing. There is no perfection. Give yourself a break.

(Group chat 29)

I feel like I tune in to who they are, and my kids are different. Sometimes they need to be left alone, sometimes they are immediately ready to talk about how they are feeling. And I have learned to apologise if I get things wrong, or if I've been upset.

My parents never did that for me, I think I should.

(Group chat 27)

I want them to not worry, to come and ask. I couldn't do that; we never spoke about feelings. It's taken me forever to change the way we raise our kids. So, to be able to say what they want to say.

(Group chat 32)

We've always been really open with the boys. When I grew up, well it was very closed, I wanted it to be different for my boys. Before you didn't get to find out anything, you weren't told anything, whereas I'm very open with the boys about their body, about growing up. We've discussed sexual intercourse, puberty, I've got them books because they are massive readers. Now my husband does find it embarrassing, but I want them to be able to come to me if there is anything happening to them, anything they don't understand.

(Group chat 32)