

Talking with Children About Potentially Sensitive Topics: Birth, Sex, Death, and Santa

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by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Parents often struggle with the likelihood of having potentially uncomfortable conversations with their children about topics such as birth, sexual practices, death, and fantastical beings, such as Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny. Many parents are reluctant to initiate these conversations due to uncertainty about the appropriate timing or language to use when speaking with their children. Literatures exist that describe children's understandings of these potentially sensitive topics, and some studies even describe parent-child talk in these areas. Little information, however, is available on the most *effective* ways to communicate with children about these topics. Our goal in this project was to gather empirical evidence and create a literature analysis on current research findings about each of the topics. We then conducted a front-end study in which we interviewed parents about their thoughts, opinions and beliefs in order to further inform our efforts to create a website as a resource for parents who feel hesitant about having these conversations with their children.

We began with an exploration of how children learn about the world around them, which provides the informational base that children use to create their perceptions of birth, sexual practices, death, and fantastical beings. Children gain knowledge about the world through both their personal construction of knowledge and what they learn from others. They are naturally curious and engage in developing and testing personal theories, as well as learn about parts of the world through adult testimonies. However, children are selective in what they choose to believe, especially if adult answers are inconsistent with their own observations or ideas (Koenig & Sabbagh, 2013). After describing general learning mechanisms, we broke our literature review into the following three sections: what children know about sensitive topics, parent and child

conversations about sensitive topics, and cultural variation on sensitive topics. Each part contained a subsection on one of the four sensitive topics.

In the first section, what children know, we explored various stages of development in which children are able to learn and understand sensitive topics. In terms of birth, children typically learn to answer the question in a series of stages, starting around age 3 years, and ending with a complete understanding around fifteen years of age (Caron & Ahlgrim, 2012). In the area of sexual practices, diversity in children's sexual education depended largely on the quality of their school's sexual education class as well as the quality of information they received from parents. In the section on death, research has shown that it is not until around age 7 years, that children are able to fully understand death (Slaughter, 2005). For the topic of fantastical beings, children as young as 3 years of age have been known to make fantasy/reality distinctions but become more aware of the consistency between physical evidence and adult testimony by the ages of 4 to 5 years (Woolley & Ghossainy, 2013). The topics of this section examined the developmental differences of when children are able to grasp these concepts within their cognitive and age restraints.

In the parent conversations section, we explored the parents' role in providing information to their children and engaging in discussions about these topics. In the topic of birth, studies looked at how parents could facilitate these conversations. This included using real life moments as teachable moments to ease conversation (Wilson, Dalberth, Koo, & Gard, 2010). In the area of sexual practices, research suggested that parents who spend more physical time with their children can have a significant impact in promoting healthy sexual practices and delayed initiation of first sexual experiences (Wight & Fullerton, 2012). The section on death looked at parental hesitation in talking with their children about death, while also emphasizing the

importance of speaking honestly with their children so that they feel confident in their parents to teach about their world around them (Miller et al., 2014). Finally, in the area of fantastical beings, the parents' most important role is to support children's beliefs by giving simple explanations to questions while also allowing children to use their imagination to form answers of their own (Sabbagh, Ito, & Christopher, under review).

The final section of cultural variation looked at cultural differences in practices and beliefs outside of the United States as well as within. As we explored variations in birth, we discovered that parents in Sweden and the Netherlands are much more progressive attitudes towards these conversations than American and European parents (Caron & Ahlgrim, 2012). In the area of sexual practices, studies found differences between four different cultures: Australian, Thai, Greek and African (Sridwruang, Pfeil, & Crozier, 2010; Kirana et al., 2007; Mturi & Hennick, 2005; Berne et al., 2000). Cultural variation can also be found in beliefs about death. Irish teachers and parents report the importance of having these conversations with their children so they do not grow up with unresolved grief (McGovern & Barry, 2000). In contrast, many Chinese families avoid conversations about death because they believe it will bring bad luck (Miller & Rosengren, 2014). For fantastical beings, studies found contrasting attitudes in spiritual rather than cultural beliefs. Research has also found that both fundamentalist Christian parents and Hindu parents discourage the belief in mythical creatures (Taylor & Carlson, 2000). Despite parental discouragement in belief of fantastical beings, children still choose to believe, which shows the limited influence of parents' spiritual beliefs over children's personal beliefs.

After learning about these topics, we conducted a front-end study in which we distributed a survey locally to parents and caregivers in order to gain perspective on their attitudes and beliefs about sensitive topics. Using the empirical findings from our literature review, we created

questions for our own study to gather our own feedback from parents about their attitudes and beliefs toward these topics. Additionally, we hoped to get anecdotal feedback for the website in order to make the information more personal and relatable for parents who will potentially visit in the future. Thirty-nine- parents fully completed the survey, with results indicating a lot of variation in parental confidence in speaking with children about each topic.

The front-end survey results found that most parents felt confident in their ability to discuss these topics but differences existed between each topic in parents confidence or worry towards individual aspects of birth and sex, death, and fantastical beings. The survey results also confirmed prior studies findings of age based differences in children's understanding, although we found parents to be less interested in the cultural variation within these topics than we originally thought.

Using our library research and front-end survey, we created a website that contained information about each of the sensitive topics: birth and sexual practices, death, and fantastical beings. During our research, we found a significant amount of overlapping information on birth and sexual practices because the two topics are so closely related; for this reason we chose to make the two sections into one. We chose to organize the website using subsections under each category of what children know, parent conversations, and cultural variations. In each section of the website, we included significant findings that would be the beneficial for parents to understand. Some of the information that is provided includes: the ages at which children came to understand what birth was, what happened when people had sex, what happened when people died, and that fantastical beings are not real, along with other key results of previous research. We also included the results of our front-end study. Our website has not yet been evaluated by the community but serves as a presentation of all our research and the information would like to

share with parents to help them address these sensitive topics. Evaluation of the website is an important future direction may reveal that revisions are necessary to maximize its usefulness to parents.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

All around the world, parents struggle with the likelihood of having potentially uncomfortable conversations with their children about such topics as: where babies come from, what happens when someone dies, what sex is, and the reality status of such fantastical beings as Santa, the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny. Many parents are reluctant to initiate these conversations due to uncertainties about the appropriate timing, and hesitancy over what language to use to discuss these topics with their children. Cultural traditions also affect parental beliefs about these topics and, consequently, how they approach addressing these issues with their children. Parents tend to underestimate their children's knowledge about these topics and wait to have these conversations when their children are older, only it may be too late to have the impact they had intended. Although many studies describe children's and parent's consideration of potentially sensitive topics, little information is offered on the most effective ways to communicate with children about these topics. To generate such advice, it is important to gain an evidence-based perspective on what children understand about birth, death, sex, and fantastical beings, and how they come to these understandings. Of particular interest is the limited research on how parental attempts for engaging children in conversation about these topics unfold. By exploring how age and culture relate to children's knowledge of these topics, we hope to give parents the information necessary to have developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant conversations with their children about these sensitive topics.

Children's Understandings of the World

Children's understandings of the world originate in both their independent exploration and in their interactions with others. Piagetian theory emphasizes how children construct

understandings through active interactions within the world, rather than just learning passively from others (Miller, 2011). According to Piaget, and other constructivists, children are like little scientists who experiment and explore as they attempt to make sense of the world. They are naturally curious in their observations and will develop and test their own personal theories in domains such as biology, physics, and psychology.

In addition to children's ability to actively construct their knowledge of the world, they also come to understand the world through their interactions with others. Vygotsky's theory emphasizes how children engage with others with more experience to guide them in learning about new topics and in participating in new activities (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Guided participation by parents and peers help children become active contributors to their environments. Thus, parents play a valuable role in scaffolding young children's capability to extend their skill set and develop their understandings, although it does not mean children always believe everything they are told.

An important way that parents impact children's understanding is through their testimonies. Testimonies are statements of evidence towards the existence or appearance of something (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2008). Children learn about parts of the world that they are unable to experience first hand (due to both geographic location and cognitive development) through testimonies of their parents (Harris & Koenig, 2006). Children believe testimonies because they trust what adults tell them and their trust is not confined to objective, hidden properties of the world, but they also accept adults' religious claims. For example, some children accept that idea that God is omnipotent because they are acknowledging what they take adults to believe. The same reason works with believing in Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy, which many children compare to being on the same plane as God. In contrast,

children accept, but restrict, scientific instruction because they base it on their own firsthand experiences. For example, children know the earth is round but the ground looks flat so they may determine that it's a flattened sphere. Parental testimonies help children elaborate and challenge their pre-existing intuitions as well as conceptualize objects normally hidden from view.

Children do not simply believe everything told to them but also have selective social learning in which they selectively attend to certain social and conceptual understandings (Koenig & Sabbagh, 2013). Children may make judgments about speakers that affect their reliability. For example, children use a "historic phase" in which they note the prior inaccuracy of speakers, such as being factually wrong, bizarre in expression, and violating truthfulness. They deem the testimonies of these speakers to be invalid due to the inconsistency of the adults' answers. As children learn through selective social learning, their understanding of knowledge becomes more refined and sophisticated as they choose what to believe. The skepticism that children sometimes hold towards parental testimonies shows the development of children's understanding of the world based off their own independent discoveries as well as the influences of others.

In sum, children gain knowledge about the world through both their personal construction of knowledge and what they learn from others. Children are actively exploring the world and are naturally curious about testing their personal theories. They are also influenced through adult testimonies, through which they can learn about parts of the world that they are unable to experience first hand due to both geographic location and cognitive limitations. Despite their initial trust in testimonies, children are still selective in what they choose to believe, especially if adult answers are inconsistent. Nevertheless, children's process of learning comes as a result of both independent exploration and their interaction with others.

What Children Know About Sensitive Topics

In order for parents to have conversations with their children about potentially sensitive topics, they first need to recognize what children know about these areas. Children are limited in their cognitive capacities as a result of their age and their life experiences. It is important for parents to have a thorough understanding of what their children know in order to appropriately address children's questions at their developmental level.

Birth

Children's Johnson and Solomon (1997) examined whether or not children use inheritance as a mechanism to explain why there is resemblance between biologically related family members. The methods included a series of interviews and surveys to examine young children's understanding of the role of biology in birth in determining the physical properties of various species. The researchers used a "properties origin task" in which children were given a set of animals and were asked "with which parent an offspring would share particular properties" (pp. 407). Children with a complete understanding of inheritance would be able to project the parents' properties to the offspring. The results showed that children as young as 5 years of age could predict the kind of offspring that various species would have. However, they believed that this was caused by a general understanding that "like produces like" rather than an understanding of biological processes (pp. 416). The 5-year-old participants were also determine physical properties that offspring would have in the future, and knew that babies come from a mommy's tummy. These findings suggest that 5-year-olds do seem to have a basic understanding of the bare facts of where babies come from. In comparison, the 7-year-olds scored higher on the surveys, demonstrating that they had more knowledge about inheritance and basic biological properties. However, more than half of the seven year olds were not able to complete the

properties task, demonstrating that they have more knowledge about biological processes than 5-year-olds, but are in the process of developing a complete understanding. The researchers concluded that it takes a long time for children to explain birth and biological origins, and understanding the causal role of birth is achieved somewhere between the age of 7 and adulthood.

Brilleslikper-Sonja & Baartman (2000) interviewed 63 children (2-years-old to 6-years-old) to determine what they knew about sexual practices, interactions, and abuse. Researchers interviewed each child individually. In the interview, the children viewed 15 pictures of the male and female body and then answered questions to measure their sexual knowledge. The researchers also found that a majority of the children's parents talked with them about the topics of genital differences (95%), pregnancy (91%), and birth (84%), which children found easy to discuss. Additionally, although most children that it was necessary to have both a man and woman to create a baby, they did not know how the baby was created. According to their interview responses, children at this age knew little about sexual abuse, sexual intercourse, and personal sexuality. Over a third of the children did not understand the picture of the male and female having sexual intercourse lying down. Some participants attempted to turn the picture to show the couple in a standing position, and reported that the way the picture was shown was wrong. The overall conclusion from the study with regard to children's knowledge of sexual activity was that young children knew something about physical intimacy, such as kissing or cuddling, but had no knowledge of sexual abuse, sexual intercourse, or sexuality.

Caron and Ahlgrim (2012) used measures from previous studies by Koch (1980) and Goldman and Goldman (1982) to explore the level of children's understandings of conception and birth. Researchers interviewed 48 six-year-old children and asked them to draw pictures in

response to two questions: “where do babies come from and how are babies made?” The study examined six-year-olds’ understandings of conception and birth and compared boys’ responses with girls’ responses to gather any similarities or differences between their understandings of conception and birth as measured by the *Children’s Awareness Scale* and the *Origin of Babies Scale*. The *Children’s Awareness Scale* (CSAS), as developed in a previous by Koch is the four-point scale used to rate and compare the children’s drawings. Caron and Ahlgrim made modifications to each point of the previous scale and their measures are listed as follows:

1. Understanding that an egg combines with something to make a baby
2. Males are not able to have babies
3. Understanding that babies grow inside the mother, and that they need food to grow
4. There is a “special place where the baby comes out” (pp. 22) and understanding C-sections

The present Goldman and Goldman created the *Origin of Babies Scale* (OBS) identifies six levels of children’s responses: geographers (age 5 in which children believe that babies have always existed; they are curious about where the baby was before birth rather than how it came to be), manufacturers (age 7 in which children believe that God, doctor, or father makes a baby and puts it inside the mother), agriculturalists (age 9 in which children believe that a seed was planted, referred to as the “agricultural fallacy”), reporters (age 11 in which children have minimal awareness about biological process), miniaturists (age 13 in which children believe that babies are preformed in miniature and understandings about egg and sperm), and realists (age 15 in which children understand that ovum and sperm are discrete entities and both combine to become another unique human being). The results found that all six-year-olds have a similar understanding of conception and birth. All participants tended to score lower on both the CSAS and OBS. This supported the findings of previous research by Goldman and Goldman. Half of

the children mentioned God. The researchers stated that, “the overall findings suggest that it is possible for children to understand concepts such as conception and birth. It is reasonable to assume that parents and educators can discuss these issues with their [six-year-old] children” (pp. 33). The findings also suggested that there are gender differences in what boys and girls say they know about birth and conception. On the CSAS, more girls than boys included item four, which indicates an understanding of birth through the vagina or through a cesarean section. On the OBS, more responses by the boys were categorized as agriculturists or reporters, while a majority of girls fell into the geographer and manufacturer categories.

Sexual Practices

One component of understanding conception and where babies come from is learning about sex. Most research on this topic involves older children and their initial learning process about sexual health and practices from both their parents and their school systems. Ekstrand et al. (2011) explored women’s knowledge of different sexual topics in a study conducted in Sweden. 225 participants (all female) between the ages of 13 and 25 took a survey that measured their thoughts on the sex education programs in their schools in terms of content, satisfaction and suggested improvements. Almost all of the women reported that they had received sexual education in school; only half thought their school provided sufficient knowledge about puberty, the male and female body parts, and menstruation. Thirty percent of the participants claimed chlamydia had not been addressed in their sex education, and almost half of all respondents stated that this also applied to gonorrhea and HPV. A minority of participants thought the sex education they had received in school had sufficiently covered issues regarding sex and relationships that were relevant and of concern. Most of the women reported feeling that sex education should be more extensive, and that teachers should be better educated. Consistent with

previous research, this study provided results showing that these students had insufficient knowledge on several basic sexual and reproductive matters.

Atkins et al. (2012) conducted a self-report study tested 6,718 adolescents from 99 to investigate whether school poverty concentration influences the sexual health knowledge of high school students. The results showed that although most children and adolescents receive sexual education in school, there is strong evidence that effectiveness varies across each school. This finding is important to explore because school-based sexual health education has been found to reduce risky sexual behaviors during adolescence. As schools are an important source of health promotion, the researchers questioned whether students in poor and urban schools are not receiving the same amount of health promotion resources as their counterparts in other schools, or if they are not absorbing the information as well. The study found that adolescents attending high poverty schools received less knowledge from sexual education than do their peers who attend lower poverty schools. Adolescents who live in high-poverty communities engage in more risky behavior and have more experience with sexual behavior, but do not necessarily have appropriate knowledge on sexual health behaviors. In contrast, low poverty adolescents delay sexual behavior for a longer duration of time and have more appropriate knowledge of sexual matters. The findings of this research suggest that the quality of the schooling influences the quality of the sexual health education.

Death

Slaughter (2005) conducted a study to test whether the understanding of death as a biological event affects young children's emotions towards death, specifically fear. She stated that studies about children's death knowledge are usually focused on their emotional responses.

Ninety children (ages 4-8) were interviewed with questions about both their understanding of death and their fear of death. Parents also were interviewed to get a more comprehensive view of the way their children felt about the concept of death. The results of the study were twofold. The first response is emotional. The first result was that children tend to believe that death is an “emotionally charged issue, and the thrust of the emotional response is sadness, anxiety and fear over the separation inherent in death” (pp. 179). The second result was that young children’s understanding of death is very different from that of an adult. This difference in understanding could intensify children’s emotional responses to death. For children under the age of 10 years old, death is seen as going away. The person could be going either to heaven or to a place designated those who are dead, such as the cemetery or a coffin, but the person would be going to *live* in this designated place. Typically, children understand that those who are dead are not likely to return, but they conceptualize this in terms of their own understanding. For example, they may say that “heaven is too far away, or because the coffin is nailed shut” (pp. 180). Additionally, some children assimilate death with sleep, as if the person were in a permanent state of sleep in which they are incapable of waking up. Researchers in this study concluded that young children’s capacity to fully understand and accept the concept of death was limited by their cognitive and emotional development. However, a second wave of research contradicted these original findings by trying to understand the specific cognitive skills that are used when a child is trying to understand death. This research was done by Piaget, and then expanded upon by Kane, Koocher, and Safier.

Kane, Koocher, and Safier (as cited in Slaughter, 2005) suggest that there are a series of subcomponents that are relative to children’s understanding of death. These are: “irreversibility or finality, the understanding that the dead cannot come back to life; universality or applicability,

the understanding that all living things (and only living things die and related personal mortality, the understanding that death applies to oneself; inevitability, the understanding that all living things must die eventually; cessation or non-functionality, the understanding that bodily and mental functions cease after death; causality, the understanding that death; causality, the understanding that death is ultimately caused by a breakdown of bodily function; unpredictability, the understanding that the timing of (natural) death is not knowable in advance” (p. 180). The subcomponents of universality and irreversibility are the first two components that children typically understand (around age 5 or 6). The final subcomponents that children are able to understand are cessation, along with causality. The researchers concluded that children are cognitively incapable of understanding all of the subcomponents of death before age 7, or potentially even older.

To gain a deeper understanding of the questions that children have about death, Rosengren et al. (2014) conducted interviews with children and parents. The results showed that 24% of questions that parents report their children ask concerned finality either directly or indirectly, for example “Can you come back after dying?” and “Where do you go when you die?” (p. 74). The most frequent questions (40%) were focused on causality, for example “How did [x] die?” or “Why did [y] die?” (p. 75). In contrast, the results showed that although children were searching for answers, parents talk around the subject or limit their responses to avoid concepts that they believe are too advanced for their children’s cognitive abilities. There is a mismatch between children’s questions and parents’ answers about death and dying. The variability between what children know and what parents perceive them to be able to understand can be resolved through providing parents with additional information about what is a developmentally appropriate amount of information for their child.

Differentiating Between Fantasy and Reality

Fantastical beings are fanciful constructions imagined and created in the child's mind (Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary, 2008). These beings can be born of cultural myths, such as Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy, or can be an entity entirely of the child's own creativity, such as an imaginary friend. Parents may wonder where children discriminate between these fantastical beings and reality. Children's accuracy in differentiating between fantasy and reality impacts their ability to see fantastical beings as real or unreal. Though children have been said to confuse fantasy and reality until the age of 12 years, children as young as 3 years of age have been known to make fantasy/reality distinctions (Woolley & Ghossainy, 2013). Research has shown that the right combination of age, evidence, and testimony can impact children's belief in a novel fantastical being. For example, older children (ages 4 to 5) are more likely than younger children (ages 3 to 4) to believe in novel entities. This may be because at this older age they become aware of the consistency between a variety of pieces of evidence, such as adult testimony and physical evidence that the entity "visited." This evidence, paired with positive emotion, may encourage children to overcome skepticism. These findings suggest that, though children as young as 3-years-old can make fantasy/reality distinctions, they are more aware of the consistency between physical evidence and adult testimony at the age of 4 to 5 years.

Although children normally have trouble determining whether fantastical beings are real or unreal, they typically have no problem attributing real or unreal characteristics to the entities. Sharon and Woolley (2004) tested 61 preschoolers to examine the ability of children to make the distinction between real and fantastical entities using two tasks and an interview designed to assess each child's level of fantasy orientation. The first task was the properties task in which

children distinguished real and unreal properties attributed to different entities. Researchers presented children with drawings of various entities, such as generic monsters and ghosts or specific entities, like Santa. The children then answered yes or no questions about whether an entity possessed specific biological, physical, social, or mental properties. The second was a categorization task in which children categorized the entities as real, pretend, or unsure whether real or unreal. Finally, the children engaged in a three-part interview consisting of an impersonation interview, imaginary companion interview, and questions from Singer's IPP scale. Results indicated that children often made inaccurate category judgments, yet remained relatively adult like in their property attributions. For example, children knew that Santa Claus was a man so he could not fly on his own but they did not understand that he was mythical. The study concluded that children with high fantasy orientation, or children who spent more time engaged in the fantasy world and knew the limits and possibilities of imagination, had more accurate categorizations of real and fantastical entities than their low fantasy oriented peers.

The age of reason. A part of understanding the difference between fantasy and reality lies in children's attainment of logical reasoning, or the age of reason. The study by Boerger, Tullos, & Woolley (2009) explored children's ability to differentiate fantasy from reality and the role of parental encouragement in children's belief in novel characters. Participants included 77 children recruited from a university child-care center and private elementary school, with 50 younger children (3 to 5 years old) and 27 older children (5 to 7 years old). Parents helped create belief in a novel fantasy figure, the Candy Witch, who was a nice witch that only ate candy and gave children toys in exchange for all their candy on Halloween night if the child recited a phrase. Contrary to studies that show belief in mythical entities begins at age 3 and wanes at age 8, children who believe more in fantastical beings are found to be more likely to believe in novel

fantasy figures. Children's skepticism was actually measured as stronger in younger rather than older children, due to the age of reason. Therefore, older children are more logically inclined to believe that if a fantastical being visited them and left evidence (i.e. presents, money), then the mythical figure must be real.

In a two-part follow up study, Boerger (2011) looked at younger children (3 to 5 years), older children (6 to 9 years), and adults' belief in several fantasy figures, such as Santa Claus, fairies, and witches, and one or more real humans. The first study included 60 younger children and 45 older children who were interviewed with two tasks. The first task was a reality judgment task, in which researchers asked children to differentiate real or unreal figures. The second task was a characteristic task like the one performed by Sharon & Woolley (2004). The second study included 25 younger children, 24 older children, and 48 female undergraduate students (Boerger, 2011). Children were interviewed at their homes and completed the two tasks mentioned above, while adults completed written versions of these tasks. The results found that younger children could not clearly differentiate between human or fantasy figures and their characteristics while older children made more correct judgments of human entities but attributed several human characteristics to fantasy figures. These results show that by the age of six, or the start of the age of reason, most children begin to undergo a change in their thought pattern of what is possible or unconventional in humans. Though these findings are significant for our research, it is irrelevant to our project because it would require a more in depth explanation which would be confusing on our website.

Parents' Role in Communicating Sensitive Topics

It is important for parents to have conversations with their children about potentially sensitive topics to answer potential questions and to help children clarify their

thinking. However, parents are hesitant to initiate these conversations due to uncertainties about appropriate timing, and language to use with their children, especially in these topics (Ellis & Stump, 2000).

Birth

Wilson, Dalberth, Koo, and Gard (2010) conducted a study on parents' discussions of procreation with their children. They conducted focus groups with parents and their children (ages 10-12). These children were pre-adolescence and had not had significant exposure to conversations or education about sexual practices and health. Findings indicated that although most parents recognized the importance of these conversations, many struggled to engage in them with their children. Parents reported that barriers to communication included: "children's resistance to communication because they feel it invades their privacy... parents' lack of role models because their own parents did not talk to them about sex" (p. 56). Some parents also shared some ways that they were able to overcome barriers, which included strategies such as studying the topic itself, starting conversations with children about their sex education classes, and using moments in television or in real life as teachable moments to start conversations that may have been uncomfortable to start on their own. These initial conversations will influence the discussions that parents will have with their children during adolescence about appropriate sexual behavior, as explained in the sexual practices section that follows.

Sexual Practices

According to Wilson et al. (2010), children are oversaturated with sexual stimuli, yet starving for the skills required to make sense of and integrate these experiences into a broader context of well being. The "birds and the bees" talk is a discussion that most parents refrain from as long as possible due to the uncertainty of how the conversation will take place and the

impact it will leave on their children. Wilson et al. (2010) notes that parents are less likely to talk to their children about sex if they perceive that their children are not ready to hear about it, if they have negative expectations of the outcomes, or if they have low self-efficacy. Research indicates that parents can significantly influence adolescent sexual health and risk reduction through the quality and nature of the parent-child relationships, parenting practices, and communication about sexual matter.

Wight and Fullerton (2012) assessed the effectiveness of interventions between parents and caregivers regarding sexual health by giving various programs for parents to try with their children. Each program consisted of 14+ hours of parent participation, all of which encouraged delayed first sex. Results showed that parents who spent more physical time with their children had a more positive parent-child relationship than parents who spent less time. These children had healthier sexual practices, with a delay in initiation of first sexual experiences. Additionally, it was found that parents felt that it was easier to have the initial conversation about sex when they already had a strong relationship with their children and if they took advantage of teachable moments, especially moments when their children were still very young (Wilson et al., 2010).

Similarly, Jaccard, Dodge and Dittus (2002) discussed parent-adolescent communication about sex and birth control. They distinguished five components of the parent-child communication process: source of communication, the message, the channel through which the message is transmitted, the audience of the message, and the context in which the communication occurs. Additionally, researchers discussed that there are different factors that affect the way that children receive messages of communication: exposure, attention, comprehension, acceptance, retention, and accurate retrieval. This creates conflict as well as complexity in the way that children understand and process messages from their

parents. Furthermore, “the factors that influence sexual risk behaviors are numerous and complex” (p. 13). The researchers stated that because of the complexity of this issue, and the difficulty of communication, they felt that parents are in desperate need of help when handling conversations about sexual topics. They feel that it is vital to provide adequate resources for parents to help them have a positive influence on their adolescents’ sexual practices. These results along with the study conducted by Wilson et al, reveal that parents have the ability to make positive influences on their children’s sexual practices, but that they need help in knowing how to approach the conversations.

Death

Miller et. al (2014) stated that young children need help from their parents, as well as other adult role models to deal with developing an understanding of death. However, providing this help for their children is often difficult and complex for the parents. One thing that could be contributing to the level of difficulty is their own high levels of emotion in the discussion of the topic. Additionally, parents operate on the knowledge that children who are very young are lacking in the cognitive ability to understand all of the components of death (p. 27-28).

Ellis and Stump (2000) conducted a survey that examined parents’ perceptions of their children’s death concepts and found that parents actually reported an earlier development of death concept and awareness than did non-parents. The results were hypothesized to be due to parents’ experience with their children, or other children, who expressed understandings of death at a younger age than most non-parents would anticipate. This could potentially mean that although parents are nervous about having these conversations, they are noticing that their children have a death concept at a young age, which may inspire them to initiate conversations.

Gaab, Owens, and Macleod (2013) interviewed children about death, and then had parents and caregivers predict what their children thought in order to compare their answers and gain a better understanding of caregivers' estimations of their children's ideas about death. The questions were about six categories: inevitability, applicability, irreversibility, cessation, causation, and personal mortality. The results showed that in the areas of causation, cessation, and irreversibility, children were significantly more correct than their caregivers estimated. In addition, parents were more often correct about predicting how much their children knew than were the caregivers who were not parents. However, both groups underestimated the amount of knowledge that the children had about the concept of death. This underestimation could cause delays in initiating conversations, for fears that their children are not yet ready or able to fully understand the entire concept of death and dying.

Differentiating Between Fantasy and Reality

Parents use conversations with their children to impact children's understanding of fantastical beings, such as Santa Claus. Sabbagh, Ito, and Christopher (under review) conducted two studies, which looked at how parents' responses to their children's questions provide children with supporting evidence towards their belief in Santa. The first study used a diary method in which parents recorded their parent-child conversations about Santa Claus during December for two years. Each entry was coded for the topic of the children's questions, the type of questions children asked, how parents responded to children's questions, and any signs of uncertainty in parents' responses. Participants over the two-year study included 16 parents with 10 younger children, ages 2 to 4, and 6 older children, ages 5 to 7. Results found that younger children asked more factual questions on things such as Santa's personal characteristics, while older children asked questions about aspects of Santa that violated real-world constraints, i.e. "How does Santa fit down the chimney?" Researchers found that parents normally did not avoid

harder questions but would elaborate and give additional information. Parents did express uncertainty when responding to older children's questions though, most likely because children gained more sophisticated understandings and held more skeptical views towards parental answers. Due to the limitations of this study since it is based off of self-reports, a second study was created to gather data in a more controlled setting.

The second study by Sabbagh, Ito, and Christopher (under review) attempted to replicate general development patterns in a more controlled laboratory setting. Participants included fifteen 4-year-olds, fifteen 6-year-olds, and their parents. The study used scenes from Rankin/Bass's Christmas movies, such as "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer" and "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," to make 10 video clips portraying the Santa Claus story. Conversations were recorded as children and parents watched the clips on a laptop. Since results found that children voiced more statements than questions about Santa Claus in the lab, researchers decided to code conversations based on the topic of children's statements, the type of statements children made, how parents responded to children's statements, and topics and types of questions parents asked their children. Results showed that parents were more likely to agree with what their child said in this context rather than offering their own elaborate responses. Parents were also more inclined to ask questions about mundane aspects of the Santa Claus story in order to support that idea that Santa was a "real guy" (p. 26). Both studies found that parents responded to children's questions and statements in ways that supported their inquiries. These results show that the parental role falls under supporting children's beliefs, whether by giving children possible explanations to complex questions or providing simpler explanation and allowing children to use their imagination to come up with reasons of their own.

Another aspect of parental roles towards fantastical beings lies in deciding how to encourage the belief in mythical entities or whether to support the belief at all. In a study by Anderson and Prentice (1994), researchers looked specifically at how parents promoted the Santa Claus myth and how their children came to understand that Santa Claus wasn't real. Fifty-two families with children between the ages of 9 and 12 years participated. All participants completed a Santa Claus Interview (SCI) comprised of 14 structured questions such as, "Is Santa real or make believe?" and "Did you continue to pretend Santa was real after the discovery?" Parents also completed a self-administered 35-item questionnaire assessing the extent to which they encouraged their children to believe in Santa, their own experience discovering the reality status of Santa, and their perception of the child's reaction to discovering that Santa is not real. Results demonstrated that most children are 7 years of age when they discover Santa isn't real, with 54% of children discovering the truth on their own, 33% of children having their parents tell them, and 13% of children figuring it out as a mixture of both. Surprisingly, children had a more positive reaction to the discovery than did their parents, who viewed children's discovery of the truth as a loss of "magic" from the holidays, but also a sign of maturity.

Cultural Variations on Sensitive Topics

There are numerous cultural factors that affect parental beliefs and attitudes about sensitive topics, and appropriate ways to discuss them with children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) reported that attention to the cultural contexts in which children live shapes their home and community life as well as forms a core consideration in developmentally appropriate practices while working with children. Growing up in a family, as well as a cultural community, children develop certain understandings about what is considered appropriate and what is expected of each individual member of the group. These

ideas as well as the behavioral “rules” of the community are all taught to children by both implicit and explicit teaching of parents (p. 10). Therefore, it is important not just to consider parent-child relationships, but also the context of cultural community in the discussion of sensitive topics to gain a holistic understanding of the origins of the values, beliefs, and attitudes that are passed down to children.

Birth

With regards to birth, cross-cultural birthing practices may cause parental testimonies of how babies are born to differ between various communities. In an investigation of birthing systems, Jordan (1992) looked at the influence of Western medicine on childbirth versus traditional practices in different cultures, specifically Yucatan, Mexico. The Yucatan or, more specifically, the Mayans, had birthing practices that considerably from Westernized culture and medicine. The anthropological study examined the Mayan’s use of midwives rather than doctors. Midwives are less trained than medical professionals in the United States and believe that their birthing system can be provided by anyone who has observed childbirth at one point. The midwives believed that birth was a natural process, which would happen on its own and all the midwife had to do was “catch the baby” (p. 19). The mother would most likely squat or stand and the midwife would help hold the baby as it was born. This differs from the highly medicalized birthing practices in the United States, which allow mothers to be on various medications and have doctors or nurses attending to them at all times. The differences in how babies are born across cultures likely affect how parents address the topic of birth with their children.

The study by Caron and Ahlgrim (2012), as mentioned previously in our literature review, studied six-year-olds and their understanding of birth and conception. This study

included a cross-cultural examination between children from England, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United States. The researcher's rationale was that both Sweden and the Netherlands are recognized as countries with attitudes that are more progressive towards sexuality and sex education than the United States. Both cultures have sex education programs that as early as kindergarten. The researchers asked the question: "to what extent do children from countries with a more open approach and more comprehensive sexuality education programs (i.e., Sweden and the Netherlands) have a more advanced and comprehensive understanding of conception and birth, as measured by the *Children's Sexuality Awareness Scale (CSAS)* and *Origin of Babies Scale (OBS)*?" (pp. 20). On the CSAS, children from Sweden were more likely to mention item 3 on prenatal development and children from the Netherlands were more likely to mention item 4 on birthing than children from the U.S. who were tended to answer with item 2 on male and female involvement. Similarly, on the OBS, children's responses from the Netherlands and Sweden rated higher in their cognitive understanding of conception and birth than those children from the US and England. The overall findings suggest that those children with greater knowledge and understanding were from the Netherlands and Sweden, which are both noted for their progressive attitudes and positive sexuality education programs.

Sexual Practices

Outside of the United States, there is an even greater variation in cultural beliefs about parent and child communication regarding sexual practices across various ethnic and cultural groups. Sridwruang, Pfeil, and Crozier (2010) looked at the attitudes of Thai adolescents and parents and the barriers that prevent parents from providing sex education to their adolescent children, using focus groups, with parents and adolescents in northeastern Thailand. Generally, because of tradition, Thai parents do not discuss sex with their children. Because of generational

gaps, they feel that the conversation would be inappropriate, and also believe that it is not the parents' responsibility to educate their children about sexual health or practices. A participating mother stated, "If I brought up the subject to discuss with others, I would be looked down on as an impolite person," while the child stated, "It is harder for my parents to talk about sex with me, when other families have never discussed this" (p. 439). This study highlighted limitations in this particular cultural community for parent-child communication about sexual practices. Thai sociocultural norms impose restrictions on these conversations that discourage the discussion of sexual issues within families.

Kirana et al. (2007) used surveys to assess similarities and differences between Greek parents' and health promoters' attitudes towards sex education. The results showed that 91% of the parents surveyed reported that they have conversations about issues concerning sex education with their children. Additionally, 70% of the parents believed that sex education should start before adolescence, but expressed feeling that the teachers in schools were not equipped to lead such discussions. The teachers felt uncomfortable speaking with children in their classes because they were concerned about what the parents might think or say about the programs—a very stark contrast to both the Thai and Australian cultures.

Mturi and Hennick (2005) examined the views of young people, parents, and teachers on school-based sexual-education in Lesotho, Africa using two sets of focus groups: the first with students, and the second with parents and teachers. Teachers felt that students were given sexual information too young. Parents addressed concerns of discussing safe sex with students (specifically about HIV protection) and also felt that the teachers were not qualified to deliver sex education. Young women reported that their mothers discouraged them from sex by highlighting negative consequences of sexual behavior, but they were more likely to discuss

sexual issues with mothers than their fathers. Mothers reported not wanting to discuss sexual matters with children, because of embarrassment and being unaware of children's sexual activities.

In a contrasting Westernized culture, Australian parents have more confidence in talking with their children about sexuality education. In a study by Berne et al. (2000), Australian focus groups with parents of secondary students examined attitudes regarding sexual behavior and responsibility. Fifty percent of the parents felt comfortable talking to their children, whereas the other 50% said their children would shut down from embarrassment. In general, fathers' groups expressed more positively about sex than mothers' groups did, yet parents widely indicated that they trusted the schools and themselves to provide important messages to their young people. Parents reported believing that sexuality is an important part of their children's lives; furthermore, that it would be unethical to try to dictate the sexual decisions of their children. Instead, they value providing children with the knowledge to make informed choices.

Death

Miller and Rosengren (2014) conducted a review of the literature and identified a theme of parents trying to maintain distance between death and young children (through literature, ancient artifacts, and even old children's books) which spanned across not only European American families, but the middle-class worlds. Traditional Chinese beliefs view discussions about death and dying as "taboo" (Hsu, O'Connor & Lee, 2009). Chinese families and communities choose not to discuss these issues because they are fearful that it will invoke bad luck, an idea taken from the philosophies of Taoism and Buddhism. Therefore, Chinese parents would likely avoid discussing this topic with their children, as it contradicts with their traditional cultural beliefs to have such conversations. Contrastingly, a study conducted by McGovern and

Barry (2000) examined Irish teachers' and parents' perspectives on death education. They found that Irish teachers and parents had a positive attitude towards death and understood that grief and death education were necessary topics to discuss with children. Further, both parents and teachers reported "high levels of understanding the possibility of children's unresolved grief leading to problems into adulthood" (McGovern & Barry, 2000, p. 331). This view contrasts sharply with the beliefs of Chinese parents. It is likely that all cultures have assumptions about the appropriateness of discussing death with young children, and this would be important to consider when advising parents about the types of conversations they might have with their children about these sensitive topics. The values and beliefs of parents and caregivers will shape the ways in which conversations about sensitive topics are handled—if the conversations even occur.

Differentiating Between Fantasy and Reality

Cultural background, including familial spiritual beliefs, seems to play only a small role in influencing children's conceptions of fantastical beings. In a study by Prentice & Gordon (1987), researchers interviewed 140 middle-class Jewish children, ages 3 to 10, about Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy and administered open-ended instruments on behavior interaction with imaginary figures, the ability to discriminate fantasy versus reality, and their reaction to the discovery of the figures' mythical basis. Parents also answered self-administered questionnaires on their attitudes toward encouraging children's belief in fantastical beings and their commitment to Jewish tradition. Researchers assumed that religiously Jewish children would be less familiar with imaginary figures than their Christian counterparts. They also believed that the Jewish children would believe in Santa Claus less than the Tooth Fairy. Instead, the study found that Jewish children are just as familiar with fantastical beings as other ethnicities and had little

difference in belief of Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. Parents' encouragement was found not to relate to children's belief in fantasy figures, even though Jewish parents didn't support their children's involvement with imaginary beings as often as parents from other cultures.

Taylor and Carlson's (2000) ethnographic study on Hindu, fundamentalist Christian, and Mennonite children also showed that parents' encouragement resulted in little difference between believing in Santa Claus or not. In fact, most parents discouraged their children from imaginary play or belief in holiday icons. Hindu parents wished for their children to be more involved with the present, since imaginary friends are considered to be spirits from the child's past life. On the other hand, fundamentalist Christians believed that fantasy could turn into deceit, which could lead to habitual lying or storytelling, and Mennonite faith, which is a form of fundamentalist Christianity, believed pretend play was an expression of individuality that would break group cohesion. Even so, children admit to still having imaginary friends and engaging in free play despite their parents' beliefs, showing the lack of parental spiritual influence over children's personal beliefs.

Conclusion

Children are little scientists, who use everyday experiences to learn, as well as social learners, who attend to interactions within social contexts in order to gain a deeper understanding of the world. Though parents impact their children's understanding of the world through their testimonies and cultural background, children also shape their own world as they reach the age of reason and begin to think more logically about the how things work. Due to children's developing minds, parents often struggle with when to talk to their children about these topics. Discrepancies between what children know, and what parents believe that they know, create a hesitation to initiate these topics. Cultural beliefs and practices also affect parents' attitudes

about these topics, which also affect the conversations. Research has shown that parents have an easier time addressing sensitive topics with their children if they have a strong relationship or if their cultural background permits openness to these areas. The purpose of our research was to examine the information on how parents address sensitive topics, such as birth, sex, death, and fantastical beings, and create an effective way for parents to garner information in order to prepare them in communicating these areas to their children. Our goals for this project are: (1) to gather data from personal research on parental feelings towards addressing these topics and their past experiences using a front-end study and (2) to create a website that would provide our background and personal research information to parents in order to alleviate any fears they may have and help them prepare for these future conversations.

CHAPTER THREE

Method

This project involved two main components: (1) a front-end study of how parents feel about the conversation topics of birth, sex, death, and fantastical beings and their personal experiences discussing these areas and (2) the development of a website to relay background research information and the results of our front-end study in a way that will help inform parents in preparing for these conversations. These tasks are described in two sections.

Front-End Study

Participants. Participants included 98 parents who voluntarily took an online survey. The survey was distributed to parents on slomommies.com as well as our friends and relatives. Of the 98 participants, only 39 parents had fully completed the surveys and are included in the data results. Child ages ranged from 25 parents with children 0 to 6 years (64%), 11 parents with children 7 to 11 years (28%), 1 parent with children 12 to 17 years (3%), and 2 parents with children 18 years and up (5%). Parent demographics included ethnic and educational backgrounds. Ethnic background revealed 27 Caucasian, 2 Asian, and 2 Latino, with 8 declining to state. The 33 respondents who answered the education demographic had at least some college, ranging from an associates degree to a doctorate degree. Most respondents simply said they were college educated but 18 parents reported to having a bachelor's degree or master's degree. Other demographics included socio-economic status and profession but few parents chose to answer those areas so we chose to remove those demographics from the study.

Materials. We co-created a survey to address questions relevant to parental feelings toward and experiences with the sensitive topics of birth, sex, death, and fantastical beings. Before completing the survey, participants read an informed consent explaining the purpose of

the survey as well as their right to terminate their participation at any time. Parents filled out the number of children they had, their children's age and their children's gender (i.e. 2 children: female 7, male 4). The survey also asked for parent's demographic information, including ethnicity, educational background, and profession. The survey questions gave parents the opportunity to share their attitudes and beliefs on sensitive topics and their personal conversations about them with their children. Some questions had "Yes" or "No" answers. For example, "Have your children ever asked questions about how babies are made or where babies come from? What happens to people or animals when they die? If fantastical beings are real?" Other questions had been set to a Likert scale. For instance, "Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not very confident and 5 being very confident: How confident are you in sharing information about birth that is appropriate for your child's age?" The last form of survey question was an open ended answer, an example being, "If applicable, please share your experiences in talking with your child about how babies are made." A copy of our full survey is included in Appendix A.

The TWYK Website Development

Audience. Our target audience was parents who are experiencing uncertainty in addressing children's questions about birth, sex, death, and fantastical beings. Our goal was to communicate with parents and caregivers of children, focusing on the ages of four to seven, which is when children often begin asking these types of questions.

Procedure. Though background research revealed numerous studies with information pertaining to children and their knowledge of sensitive topics, how parents have addressed these topics, and the cultural differences in attitudes and beliefs towards these topics, few resources

have been made available to parents that provide this information in a simple and concise way. Our goal was to create a website with information pertaining to discussions of sensitive topics in order to prepare parents to answer their children's questions. Our website, Talk With Your Kids (TWYK), included the empirical information discussed in our literature review as well as the survey-based evidence from our front-end study. The homepage explained what the website was for and how it was to be used as a resource for parents. We also added a "Get to know us" page, where we talked about ourselves so that parents would know who created the website. Three sections were formed: birth and sexual practices, death, and fantastical beings. Each section included background information about what children know, how parents have addressed the topics in the past, and cultural variances in discussing the topics. An additional fourth section included the information from our survey results, simplified in order to make the information easier to read. A unique fifth section that we included was the blog portion, which was made with the intention of collecting feedback from parents as well as giving more current information to parents in the future. The final section was for references, which linked to the pages that held information from that source. Each web page also had numbers that linked to the reference page. With the knowledge that there's no "right way" to address these topics, our main hope for the website was to use the information provided to help parents feel more confident in discussing sensitive topics with their children.

Results

Front-End Study

We took the data from our survey and organized it by question, including graphs of survey participation results and anecdotal evidence provided by the parents.

Birth and sexual practices.

Have your children ever asked you questions about how babies are made or where babies come from?

Of our 39 participants, 35 parents answered “Yes” and 4 parents answered “No”. We hypothesized most parents would have had this conversation with their children by preschool. Since we found no significant empirical studies verifying a typical age for children to ask about where babies come from, we had no explanation as to the reasons why these children had not yet questioned this topic. The children who had not yet asked were boys, ages 3, 6, 7, and 11, and girls, age 7 and 9.

If applicable, please share your experiences in talking with your child about how babies are made.

Parents’ explanations of “how babies are made” fell into three categories: babies are created from love, babies are created in mommy’s tummy, or babies are created through having sex.

Five parents chose to explain that the mommy and daddy loved each other so much that a baby was created or that the baby was sent to them.

“We have said they are a gift from God.”

“I tell them babies are made from love and they know how they are born.”

“When you get married and fall in love, mommies and daddies create babies.”

Six parents described the situation as a child growing inside the mommy’s tummy but didn’t go into more depth.

“We haven’t had to talk about how they are made, but I’ve explained that mommies make babies in their bellies and they come out when they are all finished being made.”

“My son is aware that a baby comes from Mommy’s tummy. When he asked where they came out I would pose the same question to him and let him tell me his thoughts.”

Eighteen parents told their children the biology in a straightforward manner, talking about the sperm and egg or using books to show anatomy.

“My older son asked. I told him that he was a little egg in me and then a little seed from daddy. When the two joined together they made him and he started growing and growing and growing until he was ready to come out.”

“In a basic and straightforward manner, leaving the emotions of sex out. I found a book, and we read it together. I answered any questions they had.”

“We just explained it! No need to sugarcoat it.”

10 parents declined to give an example of how they discussed where babies came from with their children.

At what age do you believe a child is able to fully understand how babies are made?

We sorted children’s age ranges into 7 categories: birth to 6 years, 7 to 11 years, 12 to 17 years, 18+ years, decline to state, know in their own time, and didn’t know. Nine parents answered that they believed children understand how babies are made from birth to 6 years old. Twenty parents answered that children understand when they are 7 to 11 years old. Three parents answered children understand when they are 12 to 17 years old. No parents answered that children first understand how babies are made at ages 18 and up. This shows that most parents assume adults understand what sex is and what could happen when you have sex. Three parents declined to state.

We added two special categories for answers that didn’t fall into the age ranges. Three parents answered that children “know in their own time.” They believed that once children begin

asking these questions, they are ready to grasp the concept of sex. One participant answered that they didn't know because they personally still didn't fully understand how babies are made.

They believed the topic was all very subjective though, since they thought children could understand how babies are made but it's uncertain how well they understand the biology of sex.

How confident are you in sharing information about birth that is appropriate for your child's age? (1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)

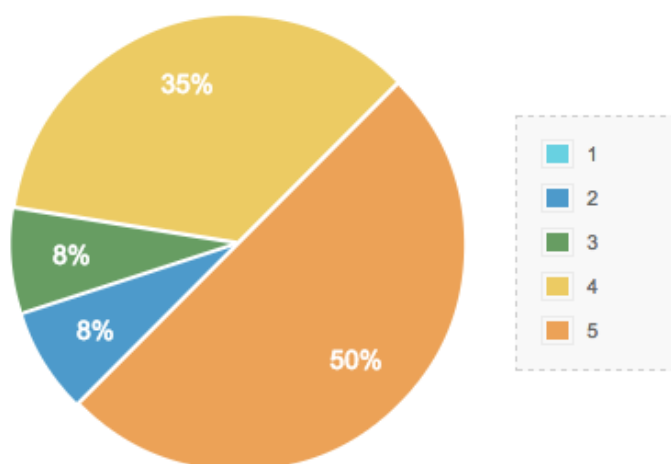


Figure 1.

How confident are you in discussing sexual practices with your child? (1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)

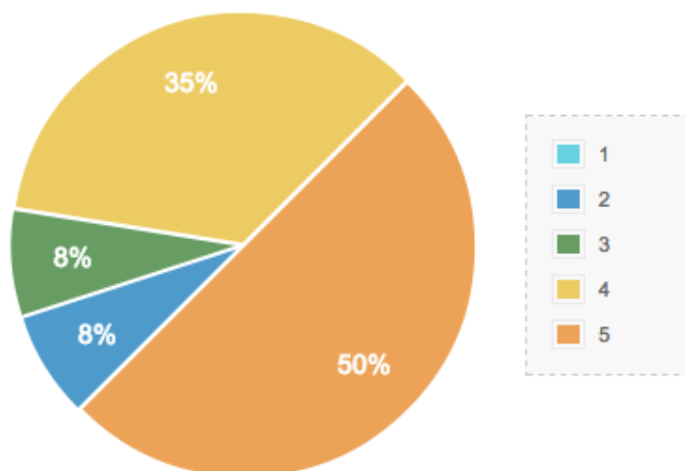


Figure 2.

How confident are you in the school system's ability to appropriately teach sexual health? (1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)

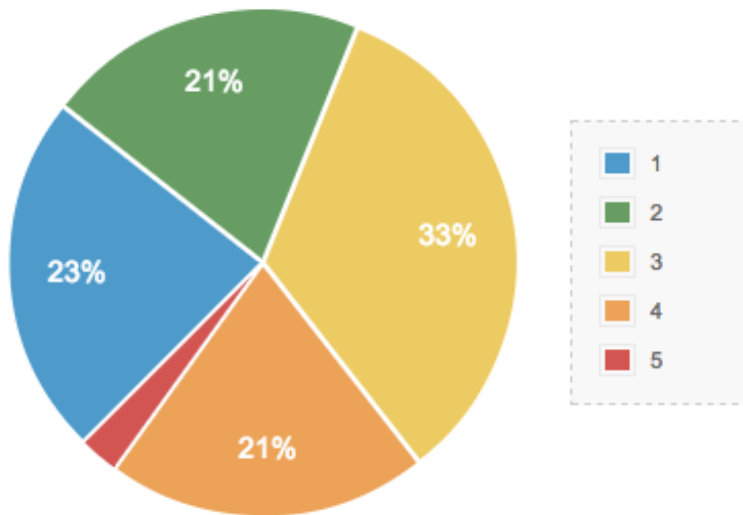


Figure 3.

Do you worry that your child may receive incorrect information about sexual practices if they are taught by a source other than you? (1 = not worried, 5 = very worried)

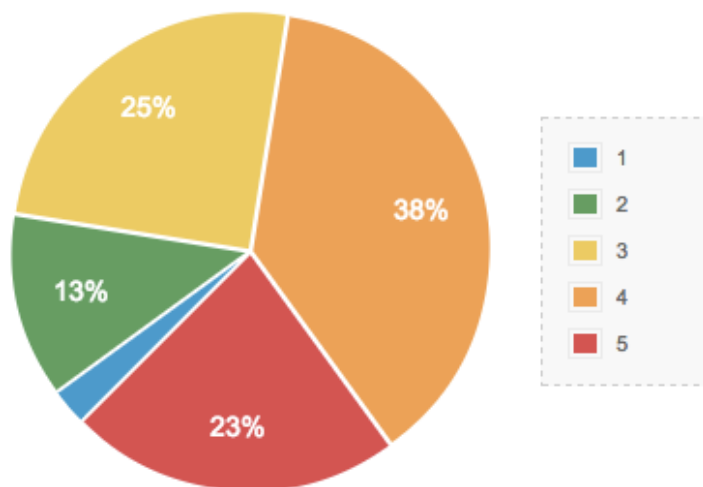


Figure 4.

If a website was created that gave parents advice on how to handle these topics, how helpful would information on other cultures' views on sexual practices be? (1 = not helpful, 5 = very helpful)

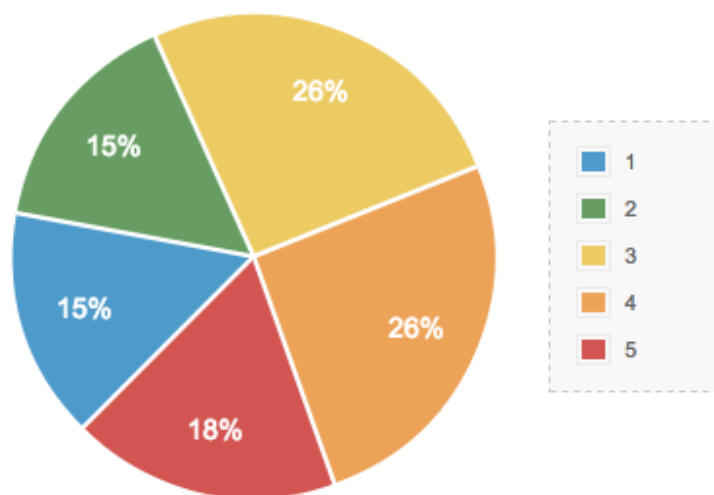


Figure 5.

Death.

Have your children ever asked you questions about what happens to people or animals when they die?

Of our 39 participants, 35 parents answered “Yes” and 4 parents answered “No”. We hypothesized most parents would have had this conversation with their children by the age of five, since that’s when children normally start to grasp the idea of death. The children who had not yet questioned their parents about death ranged from boys, ages 3, 4, 6, and 11, and a girl, age 9. Most of the children that had not asked fell under or near our hypothesized age. The same parent who had responded no for their children (ages 9 and 11) questioning birth/sex also said no for their children questioning death, which explains our outliers in both areas of the study.

If applicable, please share your experiences in talking with your child about death.

Parents' explanations of "what happens when people die" fell into two main categories: death & religion and death & science.

Seventeen parents said that they incorporated religion into their conversations with their children and talked about heaven or an afterlife.

Of those 17 parents, 9 responded that they believed in God and 8 respondents stated that they didn't believe but talked about heaven to ease the concept of death.

"In our family, we believe in heaven. So, we tell our children that when you die, your body remains here on earth and is either cremated or buried and your soul goes to heaven to be with God."

"I shared with my older son, based upon our religious beliefs, that when somebody dies their spirit leaves their body and goes up to heaven with [the] Heavenly Father and their body is what stays behind and what we bury in the ground at the cemetery."

"I personally don't believe in an afterlife but I find myself bringing up that possibility with my kids as a way of softening the conversation

11 parents said that they explained death as something scientific that "you cannot come back from."

"About 3 year ago our pet bunny died. Recently my son asked if we could dig up the bones. (A friend of his collects fossils.) We looked up the rate of decomposition and explained how the body decomposes."

"We have talked about death before because it's a natural part of life."

"We explained that everything dies (plants, animals and people). We used a scientific approach."

“Everything does [die], usually when it grows old but sometimes too soon. Our bodies go back to the land and turn to earth after a long period of time.”

11 respondents declined to give an example of how they shared about death with their child, simply that they did.

At what age do you believe a child is able to fully understand death?

We sorted childrens’ age ranges into 6 categories: birth to 6 years, 7 to 11 years, 12 to 17 years, 18+ years, decline to state, and didn’t know. Sixteen parents answered that they believed children understand death from birth to 6 years old. Thirteen parents answered that children understand when they are 7 to 11 years old. Three parents answered children understand when they are 12 to 17 years old. One parents answered that children first understand how babies are made at ages 18 and up, saying, “I think some adults don’t fully understand death.” Two parents declined to state and 4 answered they “didn’t know” because they don’t even fully understand death.

How confident are you in discussing death with your child. (1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)

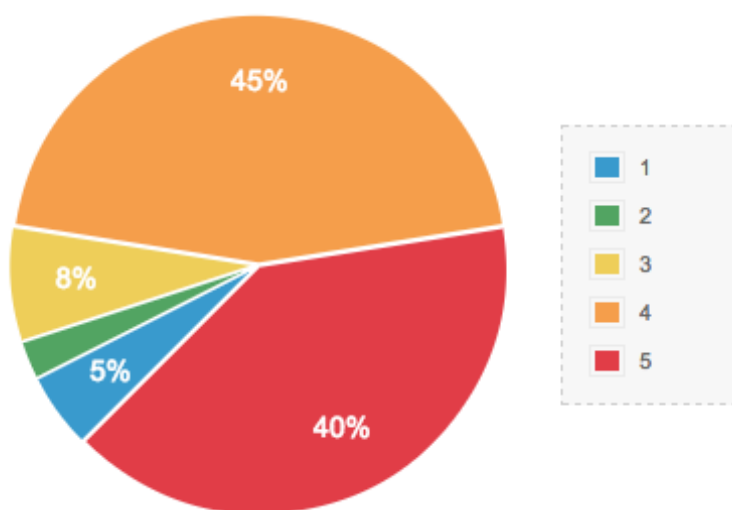


Figure 6.

How confident are you in sharing information about death with your child? (1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)

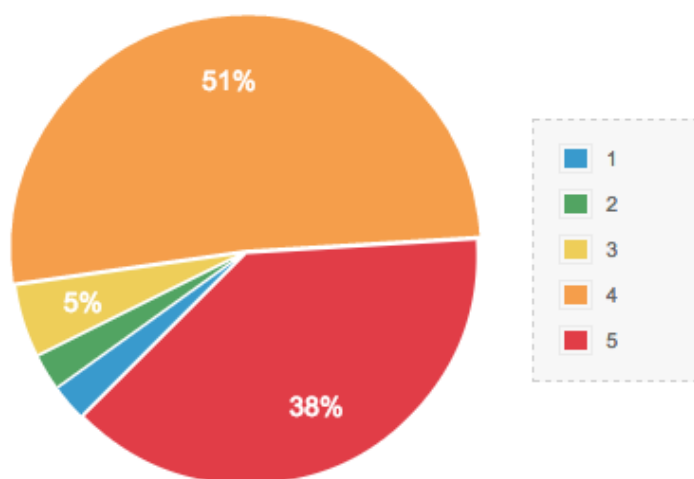


Figure 7.

Do you worry that conversations about death may be too advanced for your child? (1 = not worried, 5 = very worried)

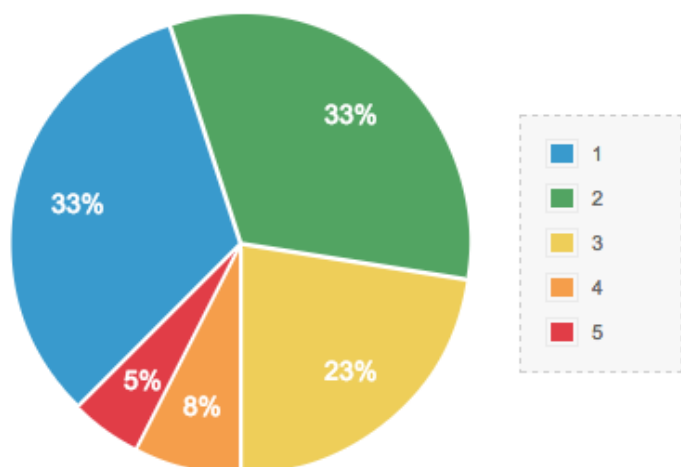


Figure 8.

If a website was created that gave parents advice on how to handle these topics, how helpful would information on other culture's views on death and dying be? (1 = not helpful, 5 = very helpful)

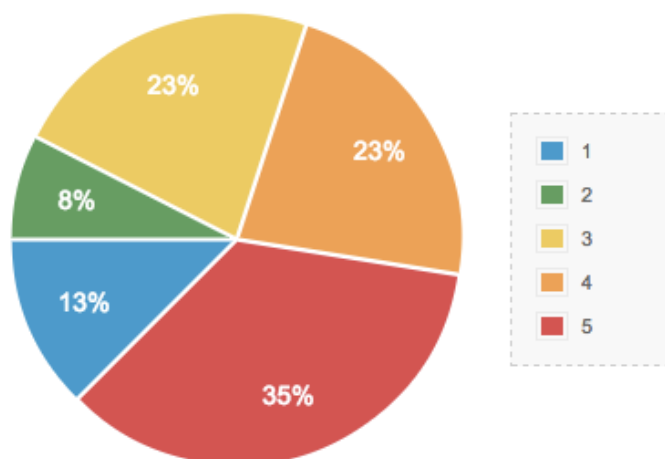


Figure 9.

Fantastical beings.

Have your children ever asked you questions about if fantastical beings (Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny) are real?

Of our 39 participants, 34 parents answered “Yes” and 5 parents answered “No”. We hypothesized most parents would have had this conversation with their children by the age of six, because that is when children enter the age of reason. The children who had not yet questioned their parents about the reality of fantastical beings ranged from boys, ages 2, 4, 5, 7, and 9, and girls, ages 4 and 6. All but one of the children that had not asked fell under or had just reached the age of reason. Of the nine-year-old male who had not yet questioned, his parents stated that, “I think my oldest gets that it isn’t real but he is holding back for the sake of his siblings.” This shows that the oldest might have already understood the false reality of fantastical beings but chose to withhold his disbelief for the sake of his siblings.

If applicable, please share your experiences in talking with your child about fantastical beings.

Parents' explanations of "if fantastical beings are real" fell into three main categories: parental encouragement of belief in fantastical beings, parental disbelief in fantastical beings, or children's lack of questioning.

Sixteen parents encouraged belief in fantastical beings and said they were real or don't discourage their belief by asking them what they think and letting them answer on their own.

"I encourage them to believe at their age." (female 7, female 5, male 3)

"I said they were real."

"I've let him continue believing for now. The idea behind each of these fantastical beings is important."

"We generally say something like "what do you think?" or "some people believe so."

Eleven parents stated that they personally don't believe in fantastical beings but teach their kids to play along if other children believe. They acknowledge that there are different cultures so everyone has their own beliefs.

"We don't "do" Santa, Easter bunny, etc. My kids know it's a game that other families play and they can play along if they choose, but we don't spin elaborate tales."

"We're Jewish, so we explained early on that some families believe in magic, like Santa Claus. That it isn't up to us to tell them that they can't believe in magic."

"The children know that St. Nicholas was a real person, and that Santa is a character modeled off of St. Nicholas. They know the Tooth Fairy, Easter Bunny, etc. are characters who are not real."

Five parents reported that their children haven't yet questioned the belief or they secretly know but still want to believe.

"He has not questioned it yet."

“They pretty much knew from the beginning that they were not real, but suspended their disbelief for the fun of it.”

“I think my oldest gets that it isn’t real but he is holding back for the sake of his siblings.”

7 parents declined to give an example of children asking about fantastical beings.

At what age do you believe a child is able to fully understand the difference between fantasy and reality?

We sorted children’s age ranges into 7 categories: birth to 6 years, 7 to 11 years, 12 to 17 years, 18+ years, decline to state, “each child is different”, and didn’t know. Nineteen parents answered that they believed children can differentiate between fantasy and reality from birth to 6 years old. Thirteen parents answered that children can differentiate between 7 to 11 years old. No parents answered that children can differentiate between fantasy and reality from 12 to 17 years old or 18 years and up. This shows that most parents assume that after the age of 12, children can differentiate between fantasy and reality. One parent declined to give an explanation.

We added two special categories for answers that did not fall into the age ranges. One parent answered that “each child is different” so it is hard to know when they differentiate between fantasy and reality. Five parents answered that they “didn’t know” because their children could distinguish between some fantastical beings but not others, or their child never fully believed in fantastical beings so it would be hard to determine their ability to differentiate.

How confident are you in introducing the concept of fantastical beings to your children? (1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)

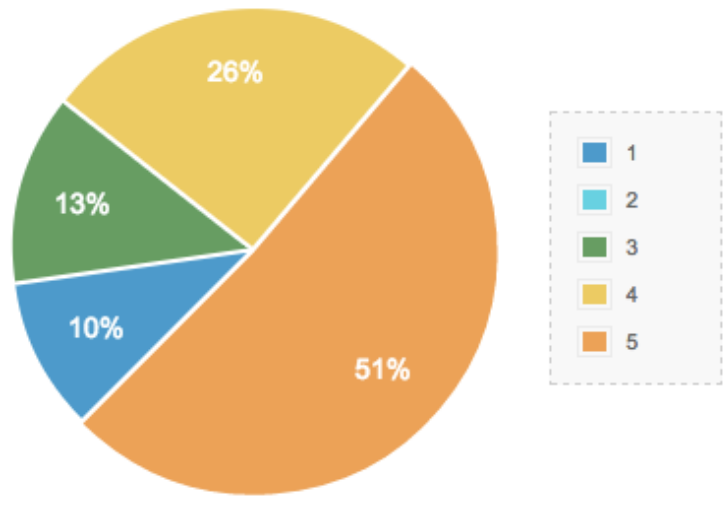


Figure 10.

How confident are you in later telling your children that fantastical beings aren't real?

(1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)

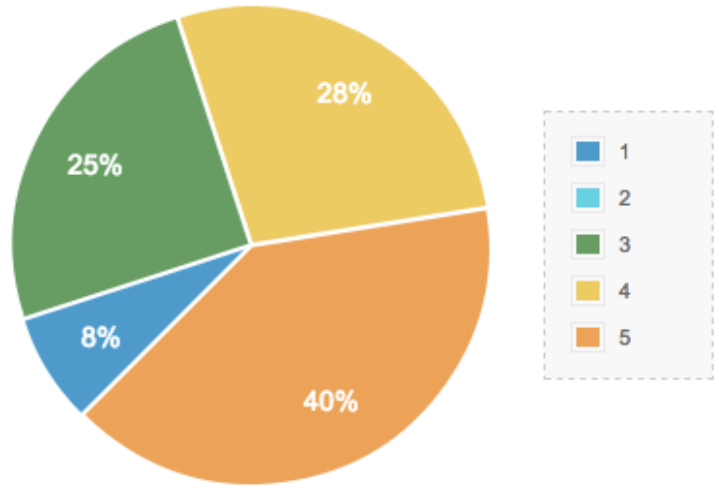


Figure 11.

Do you worry that your child may be upset when they discover that you "lied" about the existence of Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, ect.? (1 = not worried, 5 = very worried)

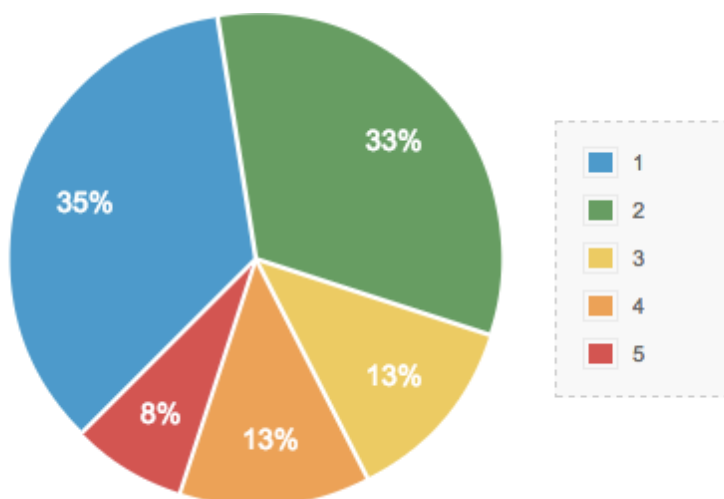


Figure 12.

If a website were created that gave parents advice on how to handle these topics, how helpful would information on other cultures' views on and Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, ect. be? (1 = not helpful, 5 = very helpful)

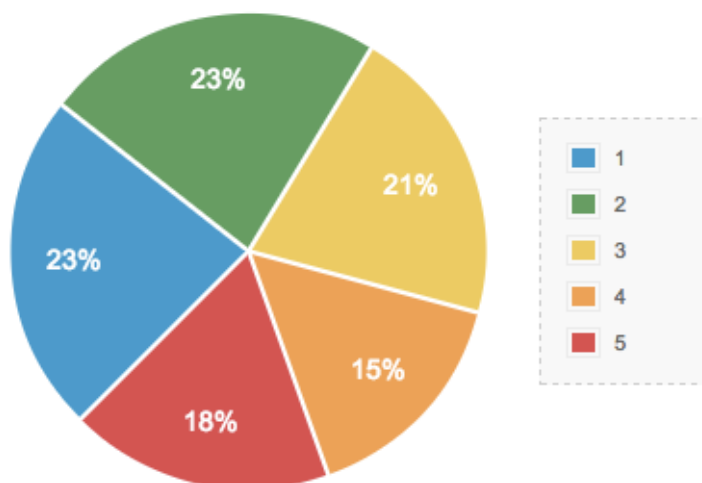


Figure 13.

If a website were created that gave parents advice on how to handle these topics, how helpful would the following information on discussions/advice from other parents who have had these conversations be? (1 = not helpful, 5 = very helpful)

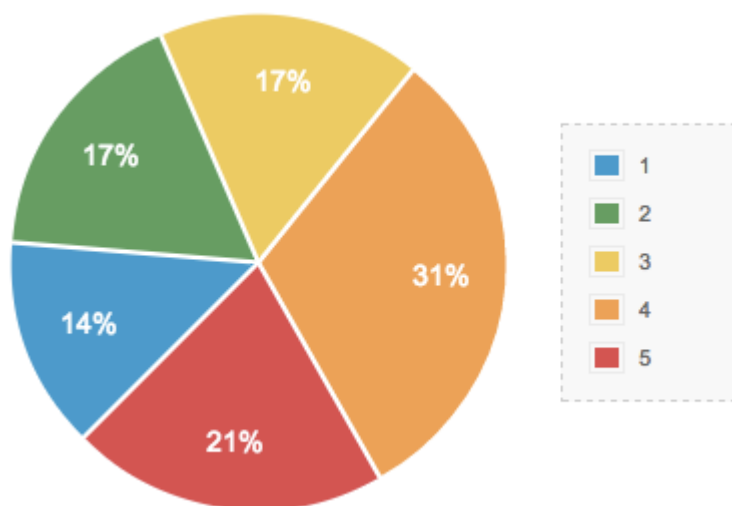


Figure 14.

What other information would you want to help you facilitate conversations about these topics with your child?

- Real life quotes and feelings of children as they think about these topics. I think it helps to see what is age appropriate.
- List of literature on the subject. Lit list would be most helpful broken down by age group and category
- Strategies in general like mirroring a child's emotions and thoughts back at them or letting your child take the lead when determining how much information to share.
- The reasons why people would "lie" about fantastical beings to children
- Idea of presenting other culture's beliefs in regards to death and fantastical, but with sex/babies would want simple scientific descriptions and graphics to illustrate, maybe even in levels
- Info on what ages kids able to understand topics and examples of how others have these conversations

Have you ever attempted to discuss any of these topics with other parents?

Of our 39 participants, 35 parents answered “Yes”, 3 parents answered “No”, and one parent declined to state. This shows most parents have sought help or shared stories with other parents about their conversations on these topics with their children.

The TWYK Website

When the TWYK website was finished, it consisted of 20 web pages formatted as described in the methods section. See Appendix B for a copy of our web pages.

Discussion

Because children learn through both their own observations and testimonies of parents, we hoped to use our website to inform parents about appropriate information to present to their children on each of the sensitive topics. We used past research to inform our understanding of what children know about these topics and how parents support their learning. To extend our understandings, we also constructed a front-end survey in which local parents respond to a series of questions on our three main topics that solicited information on their children’s degree of interest in these topics, their confidence in talking about these topics, and their views on how to address these topics with children. These two sources of information (library research, front-end study) provided us a foundation for the creation of a website on how parents could approach having a conversation with their children on the potentially sensitive topics of birth and sex, death, and fantastical beings.

The front-end study revealed interesting information on each topic. In terms of birth and sexual practices, most parents reported that they had talked to their children about where babies came from and 85% of parents felt confident in their ability to do so. Parents’ anecdotal explanations fell into three categories. The first was that babies are created from love (e.g.,

“When you get married and fall in love, mommies and daddies create babies.”). The second was that babies are created in mommy’s tummy (e.g., “I’ve explained that mommies make babies in their bellies and they come out when they are all finished being made.”). The last was a more detailed biological responses, such as that babies are created through having sex (e.g., “I told him that he was a little egg in me and then a little seed from daddy. When the two joined together they made him and he started growing [...] until he was ready to come out.”). Most parents believed that children can understand where babies come from within the ages of 7 to 11 years. Though not much empirical evidence points toward a distinct age when children understand how babies are come from, parents may have chosen this age range because children are beginning to reach maturity and are coming to understand their own biological changes.

In contrast to the confidence parents felt in sharing information about birth that was appropriate to their child’s age [Figure 1], parents less felt confident in other’s ability to teach their children about sex [Figure 2]. In addition, parents were confident in the school systems ability to teach sexual health [Figure 3], with 44% ranging from not confident to somewhat confident and 54% ranging from neutral to confident. Similarly, 61% parents felt worried or very worried about the potentially incorrect information their children could be receiving about sex from sources other than themselves [Figure 4]. This information seems contradictory, as parents felt confident in the school system’s ability to teach sexual health but were also very worried about their children receiving information from outside sources.

In terms of death, most parents reported that they had talked to their children about what happens when people or animals die. Parents’ anecdotal explanations fell into two categories. The first category of response involved death and religion. Many parents with responses in this category included religion in their conversations with their children and talked about heaven or

an afterlife. About half responded that they believed in God (e.g., “We tell our children that when you die, your body remains here on earth and is either cremated or buried and your soul goes to heaven to be with God.”), the other half stated that they didn’t believe but talked about heaven to ease the concept of death (e.g., “I personally don’t believe in an afterlife but I find myself bringing up that possibility with my kids as a way of softening the conversation.”). A second category of response involved death and science. These parents said that they explained death as something scientific that “you cannot come back from” (e.g., “Everything does [die], usually when it grows old but sometimes too soon. Our bodies go back to the land and turn to earth after a long period of time.”). Most parents believed children understand death from birth to 6 years old. Research suggests children begin to explore the idea of death by the age of five years, which could explain why these parents reported believing that their children are able to understand death between these ages. However, parents were not entirely correct in their responses, because research also suggest that a full understanding of each part of death is not fully developed until the age of 7 years (Ellis & Stump, 2000).

Of the parents who responded about how confident they were in discussing death with their child, 45% felt confident and 40% felt very confident in addressing this topic [Figure 6]. Parental confidence in sharing information about death with their child was similar, with 51% feeling confident and 38% feeling very confident [Figure 7]. Very few parents expressed worry in conversing with their children about death, with 89% of respondents ranging from not worried to neutral [Figure 8]. For the question concerning the helpfulness of cultural views [Figure 9], more parents stated that it would be very helpful to learn about the cultural variation of beliefs about death (35%) than beliefs about the birth and sex topic (18%). This could be because death

has a strong emotional tie, which causes parents to seek out different beliefs and approaches to how parents help their children process the idea of loss.

In terms of fantastical beings, most parents had talked to their children about the reality of fantastical beings. Parents' anecdotal explanations fell into three categories. The first involved parental encouragement of belief in fantastical beings (e.g., "I've let him continue believing for now. The idea behind each of these fantastical beings is important."). The second category involved parental discouragement of belief in fantastical beings, but encouragement of their children to play along if other children believed (e.g., "We don't "do" Santa, Easter bunny, etc. My kids know it's a game that other families play and they can play along if they choose."). The last category was parents who responded that their children never seemed to overtly question the reality of these beings (e.g., "They pretty much knew from the beginning that they were not real, but suspended their disbelief for the fun of it."). Parental belief in children's ability to differentiate between fantasy and reality was split between the age ranges of birth to 6 years and 7 to 11 years. Since the age of reason normally starts at age 6 and reaches completion at age 8, parents knowingly, or unknowingly from experience, have come to understand the ability of children to differentiate fantasy from reality through the age of reason.

With regard to confidence in talking about fantastical beings, over half of our parental respondents (51%) felt very confident in introducing the concept of fantastical beings to their children [Figure 10]. Despite their initial confidence in introducing the concept, however, only 40% of respondents answered that they felt very confident in later telling their children that fantastical beings are not real [Figure 11]. This drop in confidence was not from worry that their children would be upset that they "lied" about the existence of fantastical beings since most parents reported feeling not worried (35%) or only somewhat worried (33%). The drop was most

likely due to parental distress or sadness at losing some of the magic from the holidays (Anderson & Prentice, 1994).

In sum, the front-end survey results found that most parents felt confident in their ability to discuss a variety of topics with their children, but differences existed between each topic in parents confidence or worry towards individual aspects of birth and sex, death, and fantastical beings. The survey results also confirmed prior studies' findings of age based differences in parental beliefs about their children's understandings, although we found parents to be less interested in the cultural variation within these topics than we originally anticipated.

The survey results informed the development of our website in which we included past research from our literature review as well as our results from our front-end survey. Information was narrowed down to the main findings of our past research and personal research so that parents would have an easier time interpreting the information we provided them. Based on the results of our survey, parents reported a wide variation of confidence in discussing each sensitive topic. Our website presents information that is relevant based on both empirical research and survey findings to give parents knowledge to feel confident in these discussions.

Limitations

We identified three main limitations of this project: survey distribution, time constraint, and minimal prior research. The first limitation of our study was that the survey was only distributed to a sample of convenience. We used a social media pages such as Facebook and SLOCountyMommies. Based on the demographic report included in our survey, a majority of the participants reported that they were white or Caucasian. This limited the amount of ethnic diversity in our population that could have potentially added more variation to our results. The second limitation of our study was the time constraint. Our study was conducted for the purposes

of our senior project, which was limited to a ten-week period. We collected the survey results only a week after opening the survey to the public, leaving little time for participants to respond. Had the survey been available longer, it would have been possible to have a larger group of participants. Finally, our area of interest is not heavily researched by scholars. The limited number of studies conducted by other researchers meant that, in some areas, we had access very little background information to inform our understandings. There is still a significant amount of research to be done in each of these areas for us to provide more thorough information to parents. In particular, research is scant in the following: cultural variations in conversations about birth, parent-child conversations about death, and the variation in spiritual beliefs about fantastical beings.

Future Research

Evaluation Plan. If we extended our work on the website, we would provide additional results through an evaluation of our website's use. The evaluation would take place through our website's blog. This is an area that we, as researchers, would tend to and update with new current information on sensitive topics as well as interact with website participants. Parents would be able to email their own personal stories about having these conversations and we would post these stories every week. Each blog post has a comments section so that other parents can discuss their methods and offer suggestions. Parents could also give us feedback on our website through email updates. Using this feedback, we would be able to qualitatively code their satisfaction with the website and use this information to make modifications.

Parents' Suggestions. In the survey results, parents had the option of providing suggestions on what they would like to see on the website. If we, or future researchers, continue this project, some of their suggestions we feel would be the most beneficial to include on our

website would be quotes of children, a list of literature on the subject (categorized by age) and strategies for how to approach these conversations. We feel that including these items on our website could provide a deeper understanding about these topics and potential conversations for parents who visit the website.

Currently, our website provides quotes and stories that parents shared in our survey, however it would be helpful to include both perspectives of the conversation by including things that children have said or asked as well. Quotes from children could provide information to help parent feel more prepared about some of the potential directions in which children could take these conversations. Some parents also stated that they would be interested in seeing a list of children's literature (categorized by age) to share with their children about each of our topics. We felt that this would be extremely beneficial to include on our website as resources to help parents start conversations with children who may not have not asked questions on their own. Using literature could provide a smooth transition into questions and conversations about each topic for parents to feel more comfortable and in control of the talks. Finally, a parent reported that they would be interested in seeing strategies for conversations and information about how much is appropriate to share. We have included some of this information on our website, such as a suggestion to ask children what they think and let them answer their own questions. With further research, we could potentially provide more strategies that could assist parents in having these discussions.

Conclusion

Our research focused on children's, parents', and various cultures' perspectives on the sensitive topics of birth and sex, death, and fantastical beings. Though we had several limitations in our study, including survey distribution, time constraint, and minimal prior research, we still

had enough information to construct a survey from which we gathered our own research data and created a website as a resource for parents seeking information on how they could address these sensitive topics. Research suggests that children learn through personal exploration and adult testimonies. Our project provides parents with more information to make their testimonies developmentally appropriate. We hope that this website will help scaffold parents' responses to their children's questions about each of these sensitive topics.

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Appendix A

Parent Survey on Parent-Child Conversation Topics

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT: "Children's Questions Answered: How Parents Address the Topics of Birth, Death, and Fantastical Beings"

A research project on how parents address difficult questions brought up by their children is being conducted by students Natalie Hendricks, Tiffany Robbins, and Elisabeth Jee in the Department of Psychology and Child Development at Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo, under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Jipson. The purpose of the study is to gain insight on parents' attitudes toward the aforementioned question topics and create a website with information that could help parents discuss these questions in ways that are both positive and developmentally appropriate based on the information gathered.

You are asked to take part in this study by completing the online questionnaire. The questions include a couple yes/no questions, several questions based on a rating scale, and one open-ended question. Your participation will take approximately 15 minutes. Please be aware that you are not required to participate in this research and you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. You may also omit any items on the questionnaire you prefer not to answer.

Your responses will be anonymous. We will not associate your name or other forms of identification with your responses. We do not anticipate any risks during this research and you may discontinue at any time. Potential benefits associated with participation in the study include contributing to the development of children through parent-child conversations addressing potentially difficult topics. You may also find it personally meaningful to reflect on your own personal practice.

If you have questions regarding this study or would like to be informed of the results when the study is completed, please feel free to contact Elisabeth Jee (408-829-3675) or Dr. Jennifer Jipson at (805-756-2611). If you have concerns regarding the manner in which the study is conducted, you may contact Dr. Steve Davis, Chair of the Cal Poly Human Subjects Committee, at (805) 756-2754, sdavis@calpoly.edu, or Dr. Dean Wendt, Interim Dean of Research, at (805) 756-1508, dwendt@calpoly.edu.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research project as described, please indicate your agreement by completing and submitting the online questionnaire. Please

print a copy of this consent form now for your reference. Thank you for your participation in this research.

Parent Survey on Parent- Child Conversation Topics

Please list how many children you have, their gender and their age (i.e. 2 children: female 13, male 7).

If you feel comfortable, please list your demographic information. (e.g., ethnic background, profession, educational background)

Have your children ever asked you questions about...
what happens to people or animals when they die?

- Yes
- No

If applicable, please share your experiences in talking with your child about death.

At what age do you believe a child is able to full understand...
death?

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not very confident and 5 being very confident:

How confident are you...
in discussing death with your child.

1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not very confident and 5 being very confident:

How confident are you...
in sharing information about death with your child?

1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not very worried and 5

being very worried:

Do you worry that...
conversations about death may be too advanced for your child?

1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not very helpful and 5 being very helpful:

If a website was created that gave parents advice on how to handle these topics, how helpful would the following information be?
Other culture's views on death and dying

1 2 3 4 5

Have your children ever asked you questions about...
how babies are made or where babies come from?

- Yes
- No

If applicable, please share your experiences in talking with your child about how babies are made.

At what age do you believe a child is able to fully understand...
how babies are made?

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not very confident and 5 being very confident:

How confident are you...
in sharing information about birth that is appropriate for your child's age?

1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not very confident and 5 being very confident:

How confident are you...
in discussing sexual practices with your child?

1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not very confident and 5 being very confident:

How confident are you...
in the school system's ability to appropriately teach sexual health?

1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not worried and 5 being very worried:

Do you worry that...
your child may receive incorrect information about sexual practices if they are taught by a source other than you?

1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not helpful and 5 being very helpful:

If a website was created that gave parents advice on how to handle these topics, how helpful would the following information be?
Other cultures' views on sexual practices

1 2 3 4 5

Have your children ever asked you questions about...
if fantastical beings (Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny) are real?

- Yes
- No

If applicable, please share your experiences in talking with your child about fantastical beings.

At what age do you believe a child is able to fully understand...
the difference between fantasy and reality?

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not very confident:

How confident are you...
in introducing the concept of fantastical beings to your children?

1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not very confident and 5 being very confident:

How confident are you...
in later telling your children that fantastical beings aren't real?

1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not worried and 5 being very worried:

Do you worry that...
Your child may be upset when they discover that you "lied" about the existence of Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, ect.?

1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not helpful and 5 being very helpful:

If a website were created that gave parents advice on how to handle these topics, how helpful would the following information be?
Other cultures' views on and Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, ect.

1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following question using a 1-5 scale, 1 being not helpful and 5 being very helpful:

If a website were created that gave parents advice on how to handle these topics, how helpful would the following information be?
Discussions/advice from other parents who have had these conversations.

1 2 3 4 5

What other information would you want to help you facilitate conversations about these topics with your child?

Have you ever attempted to discuss any of these topics with other parents?

- Yes
- No

Appendix B

Talk With Your Kids website domain: terobbin.wix.com/talktoyourkids

Talk With Your Kids

HOME GET TO KNOW US BIRTH & SEXUAL PRACTICES DEATH FANTASTICAL BEINGS OUR RESEARCH BLOG REFERENCES

a website to help parents talk with their children about potentially sensitive topics:
Birth, Death, and Fantastical Beings



About Our Website...

Parents often struggle with having conversations with their children about certain topics, including:

- how babies are made
- what happens when someone dies
- and the reality of Santa, the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny.

Our purpose in creating this website was to provide a place for parents who have questions about these topics to learn about relevant research in child development. This website is not meant to tell parents what to say to their children rather to provide helpful information in order to facilitate conversations and alleviate any fears that parents may have.

We hope you find this website informative! We would be happy to hear any feedback you'd like to share!

WHERE DO BABIES
COME FROM?

IS SANTA CLAUS
REAL?

WHAT HAPPENS TO
PEOPLE WHEN THEY
DIE?

Talk With Your Kids

HOME GET TO KNOW US BIRTH & SEXUAL PRACTICES DEATH FANTASTICAL BEINGS OUR RESEARCH BLOG REFERENCES

a website to help parents talk with their children about potentially sensitive topics:
Birth, Death, and Fantastical Beings

Get to know us

WE ARE A GROUP OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT MAJORS AT CAL POLY IN SAN LUIS OBISPO, CALIFORNIA. WE CREATED THIS WEBSITE FOR OUR SENIOR PROJECT AND WE'RE EXCITED TO SHARE THIS INFORMATION WITH YOU!



Tiffany Robbins

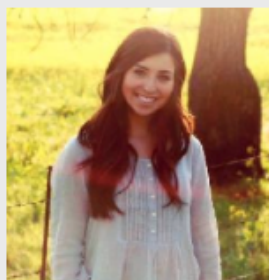
Hello, everyone! My name is Tiffany Robbins. I first knew I wanted to work with children when I was five years old playing "teacher" with my stuffed animals. That continued until middle school, and then babysitting became my job for the next ten years. Over the last ten years, my passion for children has grown tremendously. I've nannied, interned with foster youth and interned at a preschool. Through these experiences, I learned that working with children is the path for me. Their youth and innocence inspires me to love my life everyday and find joy in every thing I do. After I graduate this spring, I will be moving back home. My ultimate goal is to go back to school and earn a Masters degree to work with at-risk children or work in behavior therapy. I want to show each child they are loved and cared for and have the potential to achieve anything they aspire to do.

Elisabeth Jee

Hi! My name is Elisabeth Jee. Growing up, I always thought that I was going to be an engineer like my dad, which is what drew me to Cal Poly. Then, my senior year of high school, I volunteered as a TA in a 6th grade classroom and fell in love with teaching. In the end, I followed my mother's footsteps and decided I wanted to be an elementary school teacher. Cal Poly has provided me with many opportunities to "Learn by Doing." I've had internships working at the SLO Children's Museum and Pacheco Elementary School. Following my graduation, I will be going abroad for a semester to work with children on military bases. Upon my return, I hope to get into the credential program and finally fulfill my dream of teaching elementary school children. I believe that children are our future and it's our job to educate them and prepare them to reach whatever dreams they hope to achieve.



Natalie Hendricks



Hi! I'm Natalie Hendricks. I am a Child Development major at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, as well. I have always known that I wanted to work with children, and have loved my time spent in the program at Cal Poly, working towards this dream. I have been teaching preschool for the past 2 and a half years, and I have really enjoyed my job. I am excited to continue my career in working with children. After graduation from Cal Poly, I hope to continue my education and pursue a Master's degree in Teaching with a multisubject credential, as well as a credential to teach elementary special education. I absolutely love working with children and am excited to see what the future holds!

We Thank You for Your Support!

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Birth and Sexual Practices

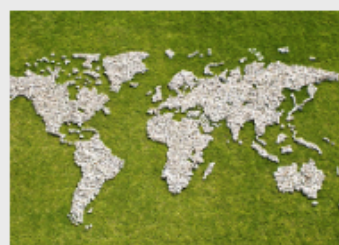
What Children Know



Parental Conversations



Cultural Variation



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How much does my child know?

WHERE DO BABIES COME FROM? 5

Typically, children learn the answer to this question at various ages depending on each child's development. Each stage of understanding is listed here:

1. Belief that the **babies have always existed**,
2. but they were living somewhere else
3. **Belief that God, doctor, or daddy makes a baby** and puts it inside the mom
4. **Belief that a seed was planted** in mom's tummy
5. **Naive awareness about biological process** of conception
6. **Early understandings about egg and sperm**
7. **Understanding that ovum and sperm are discrete entities** and both combine to become another unique human being



TEENS AND SEX ED 2 & 6

- Studies have shown about **half of students thought they received sufficient information** about puberty, male & female body parts, & menstruation
- The participants reported **never** hearing of sexual diseases like chlamydia, gonydyloma, and HPV
- Adolescents who attend **high poverty schools**:
 - have lower quality sexual education teachers than those in low poverty schools
 - engaged in earlier and more risky sexual behavior

WHAT YOUNG CHILDREN KNOW 4

- Most parents have reported talking with their **younger children (ages 2-6)** about pregnancy and the biological differences between boys and girls
- From these conversations, most children know that **a man and woman is needed to make a baby**, but most children did not have know of how this occurs
- Children **understood physical intimacy** such as kissing and cuddling but had **no knowledge of intercourse or sexuality**



For more information about how to handle talking about this topic with your child, visit the [parent conversations](#) page!



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What could I discuss with my child?

Many parents in the U.S feel that talking with their children about sex is **important** **BUT** they **refrain** because:

1. They perceive their child as being **too young or not ready** to hear about it
2. They do **not know appropriate language** to use in the discussion

19



Parents can significantly influence adolescent sexual health risk and risk reduction

PARENT AND CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

19

Parents who spend **more physical time** with their children typically have a **more positive parent-child relationship**. These children are more likely to:

- have healthier sexual practices
- delay initiation of first sexual experiences

These parents also feel more comfortable having conversations about sex and taking advantage of teachable moments.

HOW TO START THE CONVERSATION

20

- Typically parents feel more comfortable if they take time to **study up** on the topic prior to initiating the conversation to feel more prepared
- **Use moments from TV or real life** as teachable moments to ease into the conversation
- For teens, **ask questions** and use what they have been learning in their sexual education classes as a conversation starter



Always ask your child questions to gain a better understanding of how much they know!

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What cultural variations exist?

This page shows cultural variation through separate studies carried out in countries outside of the United States.



- Traditionally, **Thai** parents do not discuss sex with their children because they...
 - find it inappropriate
 - don't believe it's their responsibility to educate their children on sexual practices

17



- **Australian** parents are more confident than American parents in explaining sexual health to their children 3
- **Greek** parents
 - report almost always discussing sexual practices with their children before adolescence
 - do not think their children's teachers are well equipped to do so 9
- **African** parents worry teachers aren't educated enough to teach their children appropriate knowledge on sexual practices.
 - African mothers discouraged their daughters from having sex by discussing negative sexual consequences 12

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WHAT CHILDREN KNOW
PARENT CONVERSATIONS
CULTURAL VARIATION

Death

What Children Know



Parent Conversations



Cultural Variation



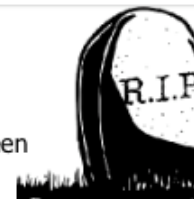
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How much does my child know?



HOW MUCH ABOUT THE CONCEPT OF DEATH CAN MY CHILD *REALLY* UNDERSTAND?

16

For children **under 10 years old**, death is typically seen as "going away"

- usually to a place designated for those who are dead (such as a cemetery or a coffin)
- there is an understanding that the person is not likely to return but they usually believe that the person is going to *live* in their new place

HI, MOM!

THERE ARE A FEW CONCEPTS THAT I NEED TO UNDERSTAND BEFORE I CAN FULLY UNDERSTAND DEATH...

1. UNDERSTANDING THAT THE DEAD CANNOT COME BACK TO LIFE
2. UNDERSTANDING THAT ALL LIVING THINGS (AND ONLY LIVING THINGS) DIE EVENTUALLY
3. THE UNDERSTANDING THAT DEATH IS CAUSED BY A BREAKDOWN OF BODILY FUNCTION
4. THAT DEATH IS UNPREDICTABLE (THE TIMING IS NOT KNOWN IN ADVANCE)

16

MY CHILD TALKS ABOUT PEOPLE THAT HAVE PASSED AWAY AS BEING ASLEEP...

16

Studies have shown that children often assimilate death with sleep

- but the sleep is a permanent state in which the person is incapable of waking up

Children typically understand numbers 1 and 2 between the **ages of 5 and 6 years**.

The other concepts typically develop later, but usually children are able to understand all around **age 7** (but varying slightly for each child)

For more information about how to handle talking about this topic with your child, visit the [parent conversations](#) page!

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What could I discuss with my child?

I UNDERSTAND THAT MY CHILD NEEDS MY HELP TO UNDERSTAND DEATH, BUT I AM NERVOUS ABOUT HAVING THESE CONVERSATIONS!

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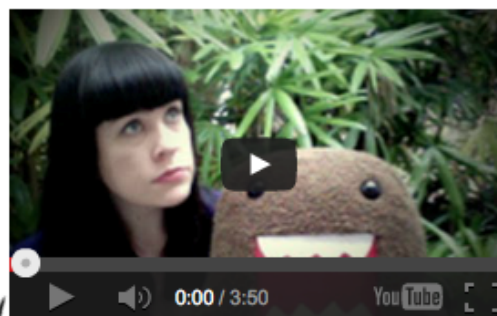
- Studies have shown that parents often struggle to talk with their children about death because their own levels of emotions about this topic are very high.
- Parents tend to believe that children who are younger are not capable of fully understanding all of the components of death correctly.

Research states that the most important thing to remember is to **speak honestly** with children about death, so your child is not left with confusion or incorrect ideas.

Children rely on their parents to learn about the world around them.

Z

This woman is a mortician and offers great tips about how talk about death with your child!



HERE'S HER ADVICE!

TALK WITH
YOUR
CHILDREN!

Parents often underestimate how much their children are able to understand about death, which causes them to delay these conversations.

Z

1. **Ask your child questions** to find out how much he/she already knows.
2. **Respond with simple, honest answers** to their thoughts and questions.
3. **Check in with their feelings** and remind them that their feelings are okay!
4. **Ask your child if he/she has any questions**, even if they have not asked! Don't assume they are not curious just because they have not asked yet.
5. **Tell your child if you don't know** the answer to their questions. There are certain parts about death that even parents don't understand, and that is okay.

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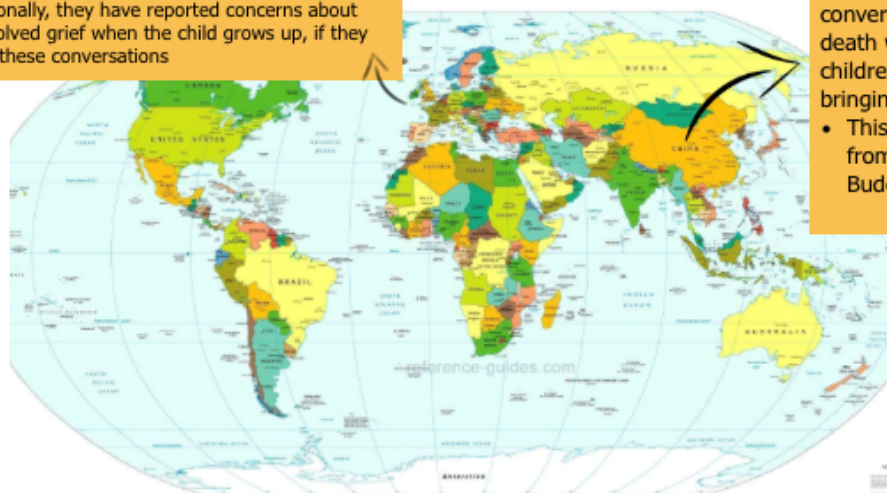
What cultural variations exist?

Studies have found that **Irish** teachers and parents have a positive attitude towards death: ¹¹

- They report understanding the importance of having conversations about death with their children
- Additionally, they have reported concerns about unresolved grief when the child grows up, if they avoid these conversations

Traditionally, many **Chinese** families will avoid conversations about death with their children for fear of bringing bad luck

- This idea comes from Taoism and Buddhist tradition.



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WHAT CHILDREN KNOW

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

CULTURAL VARIATION

Fantastical Beings

What Children Know



Parent Conversations



Cultural Variation



What are
fantastical beings?

Fantastical beings are imaginative creations formed by children. These beings can be born of cultural myths, such as Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy, or can be an entity entirely of the child's own creation, such as an imaginary friend.

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How much does my child know?

CAN MY CHILD
DIFFERENTIATE
BETWEEN FANTASY
AND REALITY?

Children as young as **3 years of age** have been known to make fantasy/reality distinctions. ²¹

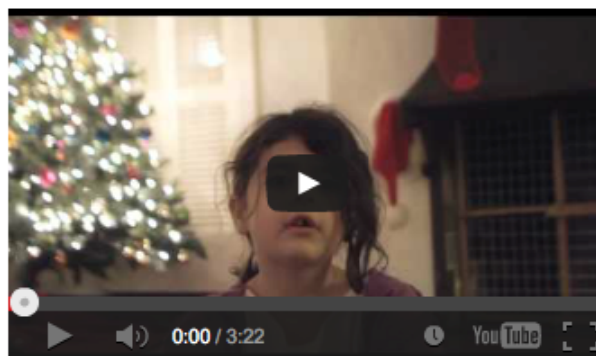
Children, **ages 4 to 5 years**, are more aware of the consistency between physical evidence and adult testimony than their younger peers. ²¹

For example, "Santa ate the cookies I left him and my parents said he visited last night, therefore he is real."

DID YOU KNOW...

Children who spend more time engaged in the fantasy world know the limits and possibilities of imagination and have more accurate categorizations of real and fantastical entities than their less fantasy-oriented peers. ¹⁵

Watch a 6-year-old girl explain to you why Santa Claus is real using physical evidence that her parents provided



For more information about how to handle talking about this topic with your child, visit the [parent conversations](#) page!

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What could I discuss with my child?

PARENTS NORMALLY DON'T AVOID
YOUNG CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS BUT
ELABORATE AND GIVE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION.

14

Younger children (ages 2 to 4) tend to ask more factual questions than older children.

- "Is Santa happy all the time?"
- "Where does the Easter Bunny live?"

Older children (ages 5 to 7) tend to ask questions about aspects that violate real-world constraints

- "How does Santa fit down the chimney?"
- "How does the Tooth Fairy visit all the houses every night?"

PARENTS SOMETIMES EXPRESS
UNCERTAINTY TOWARD
OLDER CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS DUE TO
THEIR MORE SOPHISTICATED UNDERSTANDING AND
SKEPTICAL VIEW TOWARD PARENTAL ANSWERS.

14

MOST OF THE TIME, PARENTS DON'T EVEN HAVE TO
TELL THEIR KIDS THAT FANTASTICAL BEINGS AREN'T
REAL

1

In a study looking at belief in Santa Claus,

- 54% of children discovered the truth on their own.
- 33% of children had their parents tell them.
- 13% of children figured it out as a mixture of both.

Overall, children had a more positive reaction to the discovery than their parents, who viewed it as a sign of maturity but also a loss of "magic" from the holidays.

THE PARENTAL ROLE FALLS UNDER SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S
BELIEFS BY GIVING SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS AND ALLOWING
CHILDREN TO USE THEIR IMAGINATION TO FORM REASONS OF
THEIR OWN.

14



Check out this interview, which talks about different experts opinions on children believing or denying the myth of Santa Claus: ["The Truth About Kids and Santa"](#)

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What cultural variations exist?

CULTURAL BACKGROUND PLAYS A ROLE IN INFLUENCING CHILDREN'S BELIEF IN FANTASTICAL BEINGS.

Jewish parents don't emphasize their children's involvement with fantastical beings since they follow different cultural beliefs. ¹³



Fundamentalist Christian parents don't encourage belief in fantasy because they think it could turn into deceit, which could lead to habitual lying or storytelling. ¹⁸



Mennonite parents discourage pretend play because they see it as an expression of individuality, which could break group cohesion. ¹⁸

Hindu parents discourage the belief because imaginary friends are considered to be spirits from the child's past life. ¹⁸

EVEN SO, CHILDREN ADMIT TO STILL HAVING IMAGINARY FRIENDS, ENGAGING IN PRETEND PLAY, AND BELIEVING IN FANTASTICAL BEINGS DESPITE THEIR PARENTS' DISCOURAGEMENT, SHOWING THE LIMITED INFLUENCE OF PARENTS OVER CHILDREN'S PERSONAL BELIEFS. ¹⁸

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Parent Survey on Parent-Child Conversations

WHY MAKE A SURVEY ABOUT THESE TOPICS?

We created a survey to explore the thoughts and attitudes of parents and caregivers in regards to talking to their children about birth/sexual practices, death, and fantastical beings.

WHAT DID THE QUESTIONS ASK ABOUT?

Our survey asked parents questions about:

- whether or not their children had questioned them about these topics
- how much they thought their children could understand
- their confidence in having conversations about these topics

Survey Results:

Birth & Sex

Death

Fantastical Beings



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Survey Results: Birth & Sexual Practices

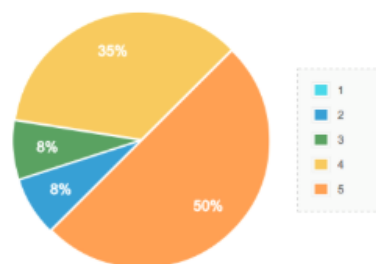
HAVE YOUR CHILDREN EVER ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW BABIES ARE MADE OR WHERE BABIES COME FROM?

Of the parents who answered this question, results showed:

- 90% said "Yes"
- 10% said "No"

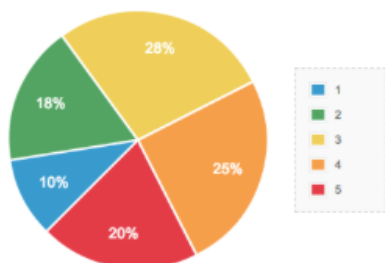
How confident are you in sharing information about birth that is appropriate for your child's age?

(1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)



How confident are you in discussing sexual practices with your child?

(1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)



The results reported on the graphs were rounded up to be whole numbers, therefore the percentages are not equal to an exact 100%.

WHAT DID PARENTS SAY TO THEIR CHILDREN ABOUT WHERE BABIES COME FROM?

Some parents explained that the **mommy and daddy loved each other so much** that a baby was created or that the baby was **sent to them**.

- "We have said they are a gift from God."
- "I tell them babies are made from love and they know how they are born."
- "When you get married and fall in love, mommies and daddies create babies."

Other parents described the situation as a **child growing inside the mommy's tummy** but didn't explain more than that.

- "We haven't had to talk about how they are made, but I've explained that mommies make babies in their bellies and they come out when they are all finished being made."
- "My son is aware that a baby comes from Mommy's tummy. When he asked where they come out I would pose the same question to him and let him tell me his thoughts."

Most parents taught their children the **biology** in a straightforward manner, talking about the **sperm and egg** or using books to **show anatomy**.

- "I told him that he was a little egg in me and then a little seed from daddy. When the two joined together they made him and he started growing... until he was ready to come out."
- "In a basic and straightforward manner, leaving the emotions of sex out. I found a book, and we read it together. I answered any questions they had."
- "We just explained it! No need to sugarcoat it."

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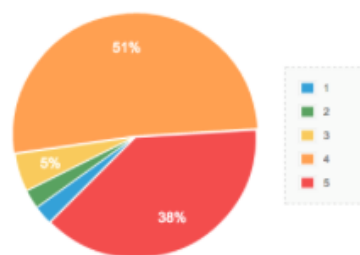
Survey Results: Death

HAVE YOUR CHILDREN EVER ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS TO PEOPLE OR ANIMALS WHEN THEY DIE?

Of the parents who answered this question, results showed:

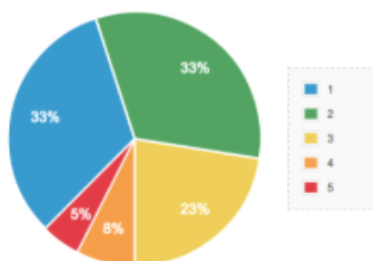
- 90% said "Yes"
- 10% said "No"

How confident are you in sharing information about death with your child?
(1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)



Do you worry that conversations about death might be too advanced for your child?

(1 = not concerned, 5 = very concerned)



WHAT DID PARENTS SAY TO THEIR CHILDREN ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS TO PEOPLE WHEN THEY DIE?

Death and Religion

Most parents incorporated **religion** into their conversations or spoke about **heaven** or an **afterlife**.

Death and Science

Some parents said that they explained death as **something scientific**.

- "We have talked about death before because it's a **natural part of life**."
- "We explained that everything dies (plants, animals and people). We used a **scientific approach**."
- "Everything does [die], usually when it grows old but sometimes too soon. Our bodies **go back to the land and turn to earth** after a long period of time."

Of these, half stated that they *believed in God* and half stated they *didn't believe* but talked about heaven to ease the concept of death.

- "**In our family, we believe in heaven**. So, we tell our children that when you die, your body remains here on earth and is either cremated or buried and your soul goes to heaven to be with God."
- "**I personally don't believe in an afterlife** but I find myself bringing up that... as a way of softening the conversation."

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Survey Results: Fantastical Beings (Santa, The Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny)

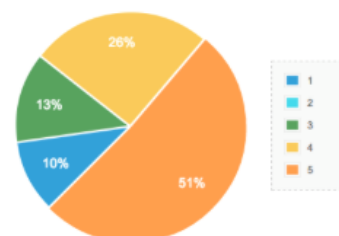
HAVE YOUR CHILDREN
EVER ASKED
QUESTIONS ABOUT
WHETHER FANTASTICAL
BEINGS ARE REAL?

Of the parents who answered this question, results showed:

- 87% answered "Yes"
- 13% answered "No"

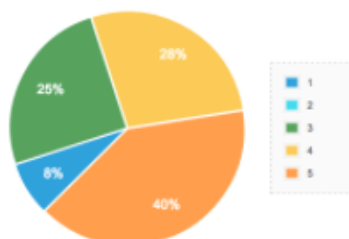
How confident are you in introducing the concept of fantastical beings to your children?

(1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)



How confident are you in later telling your children that fantastical beings aren't real?

(1 = not confident, 5 = very confident)



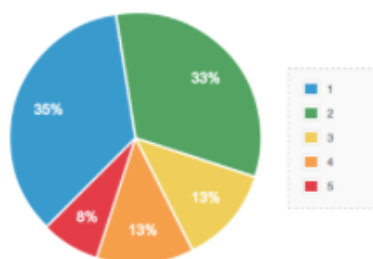
WHAT DID PARENTS SAY TO THEIR CHILDREN ABOUT THE REALITY OF FANTASTICAL BEINGS?

Most parents encouraged belief in fantastical beings

- "I encourage them to believe at their age."
- "I've let him continue believing for now. The idea behind each of these fantastical beings is important."
- "We generally say something like 'what do you think?' or 'some people believe so.'"

Do you worry that your child may be upset to discover that you *lied* about the existence of Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, etc.?

(1 = not concerned, 5 = very concerned)



WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN WHO HAVEN'T ASKED ABOUT THIS TOPIC?

Several parents reported that their children haven't yet questioned the belief or they secretly know but still want to believe.

- "He has not questioned it yet."
- "They pretty much knew from the beginning that they were not real, but suspended their disbelief for the fun of it."
- "I think my oldest gets that it isn't real but he is holding back for the sake of his siblings."

Some parents reported that their children do not believe in fantastical beings, because of their own teachings and beliefs.

- "We don't *do* Santa, Easter bunny, etc. My kids know it's a game that other families play and they can play along if they choose, but we don't spin elaborate tales."
- "We're Jewish...we explained early on that some families believe in magic, like Santa Claus. That it isn't up to us to tell them that they can't"
- "The children know that St. Nicholas was a real person, and that Santa is a character modeled off of St. Nicholas. They know the Tooth Fairy, Easter Bunny, etc. are characters who are not real."

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A Child's Perspective on Death

May 16, 2014

Sometimes children have the best outlook on life. Here's a child's explanation about the death of their family dog.

Why Do Dogs Leave Earth First? a child answers

Being a veterinarian, I had been called to examine a six-year-old Irish Wolfhound named Belker. The dog's owners, Ron, his wife Lisa, and their little boy Shane, were all very attached to Belker, and they were hoping for a miracle.

I examined Belker and found that he was dying of cancer. I told the family we couldn't do anything more for Belker, and offered to perform the euthanasia procedure for the old dog in their home.

As we made arrangements, Ron and Lisa told me they thought it would be good for six-year-old Shane to observe the procedure. They felt as though Shane might learn something from the experience.

The next day, I felt the familiar catch in my throat as Belker's family surrounded him. The young boy, Shane, seemed so calm, petting the old dog for the last time, that I wondered if he

understood what was going on. Within a few minutes, Belker slipped peacefully away.

The little boy seemed to accept Belker's transition without any difficulty or confusion. We sat together for a long while after Belker's death, wondering aloud about the odd fact that animal lives are shorter than human lives.

Shane, who had been listening quietly, piped up, "I know why."

Surely, we all turned to him. What came out of his mouth next stunned me. I'd never heard a more comforting explanation. It has changed the way I try to live.

He said, "People are born so that they can learn how to live a good life -- like loving everybody all the time and being nice, right?"

The six-year-old continued, "Well, dogs already know how to do that, so they don't have to stay so long."

a.place.followedogs.com

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Have stories to share? Send them to us!

May 10, 2014

In one of our previous blog posts, we shared about our own experiences having these conversations with our parents. Now you can share yours!

Send us any stories you may have of conversations that worked, or didn't, and we'll choose a story per week to add to our blog! Be a part of parent discussions and share your knowledge!

We look forward to hearing from you soon

:)...

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Welcome to our first blog post!



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Our Own Experiences Growing Up

May 7, 2014

As a child I was very observant and noticed details in everything around me. Every single Christmas Santa had the same wrapping paper for my Christmas presents, except one year his wrapping paper was the same as my mother's. Being the observant child I was I went upstairs to my parents room and explained what I saw and

asked...



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Our First Blog Post!

May 6, 2014

Welcome to our first blog post!

Tips To Talking With Your Kids

- Start early
- Initiate Conversations With Your Child
- Create An Open Environment
- Communicate Your Values

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Talk With Your Kids

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a website to help parents talk with their children about potentially sensitive topics:
Birth, Death, and Fantastical Beings

Reference List

Picture Citations:

- <http://tinyurl.com/gsxz8>
- <http://tinyurl.com/jh5vm>
- <http://tinyurl.com/njd9guk>
- <http://tinyurl.com/plo9q8h>
- <http://tinyurl.com/o4rysc2>
- <http://tinyurl.com/mme8znn>
- <http://tinyurl.com/qbut6fd>
- <http://tinyurl.com/l2usg9o>
- <http://tinyurl.com/khs4ss5>
- <http://tinyurl.com/ox6saeg>

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