



BIRDS AND BEES TALK TOO SOON: I TOLD MY 5-YEAR-OLD HOW BABIES ARE MADE

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“Me and Sofia and Mark all came from you, Mama,” announced my then three-year-old, Virginia, one evening. When I indicated that Dada had something to do with it, they were shocked.

They wanted to know how, but just as the words were leaving my lips – “Well, he fertilizes my egg and it grows into a baby” – I knew I was in big trouble.

“How does he do that?” asked Sofia, who at the time was studying basic biology in kindergarten. “Does he hug ya? Like a frog?”

“Well, yes, it’s kind of like that,” I replied, relieved for the help, as I swaddled our newborn, Mark, whose recent arrival was to blame for igniting the older kids’ curiosity.

I sensed that one of the most terrifying moments of parenthood was on its way down the pike, so the next week I bought a book called *How to Say It to Your Kids*. No relief there: I was advised to tell it like it is, albeit in simple terms.

My God, I thought, she's only five. And if I tell her and word spreads around the playground, all the kindergarten parents will forever think of me as the person who spoiled their children's innocence.

"Mom, can we have another baby?" Sofia asked at dinner a few weeks later. "Really?" I asked, pleased that she was happy with her brother but not feeling up to the endeavor. "Do you even know how to make a baby?" she then asked. When I replied in the affirmative, she began demanding demonstrations. "How does Dada hug you?" she asked. "Like this?" and she and her sister began enacting a series of bizarro hugs, chanting, "Like this? Like this?"

Noting that my shy husband, Enrico, had begun to vigorously scrub a pot for the first time in his life, I knew I was on my own. While the girls were busy inquiring of him, "How do you hug, Mama?" and "How do you help her?" I ran upstairs to my book and whizzed to the chapter on sexual reproduction. Damn. It still said you have to tell the truth.

Exhausted from interrogating Dad (an effort which so far had yielded only, "Eat your dinner!"), Sofia, desperate, collapsed at the top of the stairs and gasped, "How do you do it, Mama?"

That's when I knew I had to lay the cards on the table.



"Well, if you really want to know, a mommy and a daddy take off their clothes and the daddy sticks his pee-pee in the mommy's wee-wee." (Yeah, I

know I was supposed to use anatomical terms, but it sounded weird enough already.) A liquid comes out called sperm, and if it fertilizes the mom's egg, a baby grows."

Sofia stared at me expressionless for a second and then groaned: "I don't think I want to have a baby. I don't like that bad potty-word stuff."

She slunk down the stairs, and I peeked through the railings as she explained "how they do it" to her little sister, who was finishing her fruit salad.

"Isn't that yucky?" she asked Virginia, still small enough for a high chair.

Virginia picked over a piece of melon and said thoughtfully, "I like the wee-wee part."

Experts say that Sofia's reaction – a mixture of surprise and disgust – is to be expected of elementary-age kids. And in the months that followed, there wasn't any scuttlebutt about her telling other kindergarten kids. I thought information like that would be too hot to keep secret, but apparently she was so horrified that she was rendered mute.

As it turned out, I was the one who was really changed. Once I got over the shock of losing my parenting purity – and so early! – I found myself getting into more conversationally sticky situations, only each time, I'd do it on purpose.

For example, I would take a deep breath and offer to explain the words of a Madonna song. When I told Sofia and Virginia that "Papa Don't Preach" was about a teenage girl who accidentally got pregnant and wanted to keep the baby, they responded, "You mean, people WANT to do that?"

My hope, of course, is that having a thousand little conversations about

things like sex and drugs instead of One Big Talk will increase the chances that my **kids will come to me when they have difficult questions**. And now that Sofia is nine, she still doesn't ever want to have children. "Can I marry my best friend, Sabrina?" she wanted to know recently. "In some states," I replied. But that's a whole other conversation.

In the meantime I enjoy teasing her baby brother, Mark, who is now two, about someday producing grandchildren. "Since the girls don't want to get married and have babies, you will, right, Mark?"

He's still not sure what's involved in that process, and I wonder how it will be to talk to a boy about the birds and the bees. For now, though, we'll just enjoy Mark running around the house proclaiming triumphantly, "I gonna be a dada!"

ARTICLE POSTED 8 YEARS AGO

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