



## Talking to Your Young Child about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up



*The Talking to Your Young Child about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up* resource was developed by the HSE Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme (SHCPP) in line with the National Sexual Health Strategy 2015–2020.

The resource comprises:

- *Talking to Your Young Child about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up* – a parents' guide written with reference to *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe: a framework for policy makers, educational and health authorities and specialists* (World Health Organization, 2010).
- *Tom's Power Flower: a gentle explanation of how babies are made* – a story booklet written by Kathleen O'Rourke, a primary school teacher and author, best known for her work on Oscar-nominated *Granny O'Grimm*.

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# Contents

About this resource	2
How to use this resource	2
Parents' frequently asked questions	4
Tips for communicating with your child about relationships, sexuality and growing up	10
Children's frequently asked questions	12
Additional resources	15
Girls' and boys' bodies – similarities and differences	18
Want to read more?	20

## About this resource

A recent Irish study explored how parents talk with their young children about the body, relationships and sexuality. It found that most parents feel it is important to educate their children about such matters but find it challenging to do so (Conlon, 2018).

The *Talking to Your Young Child about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up* resource aims to help parents to talk to their children about relationships and sexuality in a gradual, age-appropriate way.

The resource consists of this parents' guide and a story booklet. The information in this guide will support you to have ongoing conversations about relationships and sexuality as your child develops. The story booklet, *Tom's Power Flower: a gentle explanation of how babies are made*, will help you start such conversations.

The story booklet is suitable for children of approximately 5 years of age. However, depending on the individual child, it may be appropriate for younger or older children. Children who have younger siblings or cousins may be more likely to ask their parents or carers about pregnancy, babies and birth.

## How to use this resource

As a first step, we advise that you read both the guide and the story for yourself. You may then decide to read the story with your child or simply to use its ideas and language to start conversations and answer your child's questions.

This guide addresses some of the questions your child might have arising from the story booklet. If you would like more information on healthy sexuality development and how to communicate with your children of all ages about relationships, sexuality and growing up, please visit: [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie).



## Note

*Tom's Power Flower – a gentle explanation of how babies are made* features a traditional family structure and basic information on reproduction. However, it is important for children to know that there are a variety of family structures in which children are raised (same sex parents, blended and extended families, etc.). As they get older, they can also be made aware of other ways in which children are conceived and born.



## **Parents' frequently asked questions**

This section answers some questions you may have about your role in your child's relationships and sexuality education.

### **Why should I talk to my young child about relationships, sexuality and growing up?**

The family is the place where children first learn to love and care for themselves and others. Children absorb spoken and unspoken messages from birth about relationships, sexuality and growing up. These influence the kind of adolescents and adults they become and the choices they later make.

Just as you help your child's healthy growth and development in all other ways, consciously supporting the development of their sexuality will help them achieve the attitudes, values and skills they need in order to have healthy relationships with themselves and others.

Research suggests a number of benefits to giving age-appropriate information on relationships and sexuality in response to pre-adolescent children's questions. For example, it can create an environment in which teenage children feel comfortable to continue having these conversations with their parents (Hyde et al, 2010).

### **Won't my child learn all this in school?**

*Relationships and Sexuality Education* (RSE) is taught from Junior Infants to Leaving Certificate. Schools can provide general information and a safe space for whole-class discussions; however, you are the most important educator of your child in this regard. It is best if children get their first explanation of matters to do with relationships and sexuality at home. Only you can share your values and give your child the individual attention needed at each stage of development.

You can do this through:

- Talking to your child at home about relationships, sexuality and growing up
- Making yourself aware of what topics your child will be covering in school and providing opportunities to discuss them at home
- Finding out about the school's RSE policy and getting involved if the school is updating it.

This resource, the information on [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie) and HSE publications for older children and their parents (see *Additional resources* section of this booklet) will help you to complement the RSE teaching your child will receive in school. For more information on the curriculum, check out the RSE page of the Professional Development Service for Teachers: [www.pdst.ie/node/811](http://www.pdst.ie/node/811). For the full *Social, Personal and Health Education* curriculum, see [www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/462570f8-27cc-4f5b-a13e-d1e2de8c18d2/PSE\\_C06\\_SPHE\\_curriculum.pdf](http://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/462570f8-27cc-4f5b-a13e-d1e2de8c18d2/PSE_C06_SPHE_curriculum.pdf)

## What is the difference between sex and sexuality?

People sometimes use the word 'sex' to describe whether a person is male or female and also to refer to sexual contact or activity. Sexuality is much broader; it's to do with how we feel about and express ourselves, how we form relationships with the people in our lives and how we are in society.

The terms *Sex Education* and *Sexuality Education* are often used to describe the same thing, but in Irish schools, the subject is referred to as, *Relationships and Sexuality Education*. This is to emphasise that, although it includes issues around sexual activity for older adolescents, it is about much more than that. According to the World Health Organization, sexuality education should cover the physical, emotional and social aspects of a person's development.



More specifically, topics in early childhood sexuality education include: talking about physical and emotional development, personal hygiene, gender identity and roles, and the basics of reproduction.

## **Where should I start?**

Young children's main needs in terms of sexuality development are to be loved and nurtured, both physically and emotionally. In this way children will be helped to love and accept themselves and to form healthy, connected relationships with those around them. The values and skills they develop in these early years will help them form supportive relationships throughout their lives.

## **When should I start?**

The good news is that you've already started; your child has been getting spoken and unspoken messages about sexuality since birth. Now that you are even more aware of how you want your child to develop, you can make conscious choices about those messages. As your child matures, take opportunities to have many small conversations about physical and emotional sexuality development and about relationships.

## **How will I prepare myself?**

Many parents lack confidence when it comes to talking with their children about relationships, sexuality and growing up. If that sounds like you, a bit of planning should help reduce your anxiety.

**Consider your own childhood sexuality education.** Thinking about your childhood experiences of learning about relationships, sexuality and growing up can be a good starting point for preparing to talk to your child.



- What and how did you learn about relationships, sexuality and growing up?
- Which aspects of your own experience would you like to pass on and which would you like to be different for your child?

**Identify your family and personal beliefs.** There are different beliefs within families, and between families, about relationships, sexuality and growing up. What you want to teach your child may differ from what your neighbours and friends consider appropriate. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Each individual has their own beliefs, thoughts and feelings about these topics. Ideally, relevant adults in your child's life should discuss and agree the messages you wish to pass on to your child.

**Get support for yourself.**

- Talk to friends or family members with children of a similar age or older as they may have some useful tips and ideas. Then choose the advice that best suits you and your child.
- Attend a parenting programme in your community. These are often run through schools, family resource centres and the HSE.
- The National Parents Council Primary runs RSE courses for parents – visit **[www.npc.ie](http://www.npc.ie)** or ask your school or parents' association for more information.

## What names should I use for the genitals?

Many parents feel more comfortable using pet names for sexual body parts and some parents report mixed feelings about using words such as penis and vulva. However, it is good for children to also learn the correct names for genitals from the start, just as they learn the names for other body parts. They may then be taught that these parts are considered private, but not so private that they can't be talked about when necessary. This will encourage a positive regard and a healthy respect for the child's body, along with an ability to communicate effectively. The curriculum in Junior Infants and Senior Infants includes the use of the correct names for the genitals (see [www.pdst.ie/node/811](http://www.pdst.ie/node/811)).

## How should I teach my child about safe and unsafe touch?

From an early stage, you can help your child to know what touch they like and feel comfortable with, and what touch makes them uncomfortable. It is also good to give children opportunities to make decisions about who touches them and how they can be touched. Talking about **safe, unsafe** and **unwanted** touch is one way of explaining the difference to a slightly older child.

**Safe touch** should make a person feel cared for and important. Occasionally it might also include touch that hurts or is uncomfortable, but only to keep the person safe and healthy (e.g. getting an injection). **Unsafe touch** hurts a person's body or feelings (e.g. kicking, punching) and **unwanted touch** is touch which might or might not be unsafe but is unwanted from that particular person or at that time. See the *Additional resources* section for sources of more information on this topic and check out information on the *Stay Safe Programme* that children are taught in school at [www.staysafe.ie/parents.htm](http://www.staysafe.ie/parents.htm)

## What if I find my child playing ‘Doctors’ with friends?

Try to stay calm in the knowledge that this behaviour is perfectly normal as young children are curious about their bodies and the bodies of others. Young children commonly engage in games where they show each other their genitals. Where there is no difference in age or power between the children, the motivation is generally curiosity and part of normal play. If you wish, you can gently distract or redirect the children in their play. At a later stage, respond to your child’s desire to know more about bodies by looking at suitable books or websites together (see *Additional resources* section).

## Is it OK for children to play with their genitals?

It is extremely common for babies and young children to touch their genitals. From a health perspective, it is a perfectly normal and healthy exploration of the body. As children get older they can be taught that this behavior is only appropriate in private.

Care should be taken not to make children feel ashamed of their behaviour or their body.





## Tips for communicating with your child about relationships, sexuality and growing up

There are no hard and fast rules about how you should communicate with your child about relationships, sexuality and growing up. Each child is different and each family is different. Here are some general tips:

**- Prepare yourself.** Consider your own values and attitudes and encourage other family members to do this too. Try to anticipate your child's needs as they develop. Use support materials like books and DVDs (see *Additional resources* section) to help you decide what messages about relationships and sexuality you would like to communicate and how you would like to do this.

**- Start early and keep it simple and honest.** Talk to your child about their developing sexuality from the time they are very young. This will help to make these conversations normal and build a healthy habit of communicating about sexuality and other sensitive issues.

- Simple but honest answers work best for young children. If they want to hear more, they'll ask more questions.
- Don't worry if you over-explain. If it's beyond the child's interest and understanding, it will generally go over their heads.

**- Layer, don't load.** It's not a one-off performance. You will get many chances to have these conversations, so don't try to fit everything in at once. As your child's interest and understanding develop with age, it is important to revisit topics as you go along.

Deal with what is currently relevant for your child and use the teachable moments that arise in everyday life to start a conversation (not a lecture). For example, a pregnancy or new baby in the family, or a relationship or sexuality issue in a TV programme or in the media, will give you an opportunity to talk.



**- Teach the facts, but go further.** Talk to your child about your opinions and beliefs on all aspects of sexuality, including what makes for healthy relationships.

**- Be a 'tellable' parent.** Really listen to what your child is saying to you about their life and about their joys, concerns and worries. They will do this through their words and actions. Try to listen without judgement.

**- Be an 'askable' parent.** Through your words and tone, welcome your child's curiosity. Ask gentle questions to see what your child already knows, before adding some new information. Don't assume that they know things because they use certain words. If you don't have the answer to your child's question, it's OK to say that you don't know but will find out.

**- Teach body ownership.** Impress on your child that their body is their own and they don't have to let anyone touch it in a way that is unsafe and/or unwanted. They must also learn that other people have similar rights. This is the beginning of giving a child control over their body and teaching them about consent.



## Children's frequently asked questions

The following are questions commonly asked by young children and which may also arise from reading *Tom's Power Flower: a gentle explanation of how babies are made*. (For a larger selection, visit [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie).) Sample answers are provided here, but it's up to you to decide what type of response will work best for you and your child. For young children, a short, but factually accurate, response is best. If they want to know more, they'll ask.

### Where do babies come from?

'Babies grow from a very special seed which grows inside a mammy until it's ready to be born.'

Slightly more detailed: 'A baby is made when a sperm from a man and an egg from a woman join together and grow inside the woman's body in a special place called a womb.'

If your child wants to know more about sperm and eggs: 'Every person's body is made up of lots of small parts called cells. Different cells do different jobs around the body. The sperm and the egg are special cells which can make a baby when they join together.'

### How does the sperm get into the woman's body?

'The man gives the woman the sperm.' When you think your child is ready, you can explain the facts of sexual intercourse and conception. There is a sample explanation under 'Suggested Answers to Children of Different Ages (9–12)' in the parents' section of [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie).

This subject is addressed in the primary school curriculum for 5th and 6th classes, but it is better if your child hears it from you before that.

## **How does the baby get out?**

'When the baby has grown enough, a nurse or doctor will help it to be born.'

If your child is more curious: 'When the baby is ready to be born it will come out through a special tube in the mammy's body called the vagina.'

## **How long does it take for a baby to grow?**

'Most babies grow for about 9 months in their mammy's womb before they are born. They may be born a few weeks early or late.'

It isn't necessary to go into more detail about the possible complications of pregnancy at this stage.

## **Why don't I have a penis (or other questions about the difference between male and female bodies)?**

'Only boys have penises; girls have a vulva. Most parts of our bodies are the same whether we are a boy or a girl, but some parts are different.'

The descriptions on the next page and the drawings in the *Girls' and boys' bodies – similarities and differences* section at the end of this booklet may help you to point out and explain the body parts that are the same and those that are different.



## A short description of the genitals for parents' reference

### Girls' genitals

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**Vulva** - the area of soft skin between a girl's legs. In recent years the word 'vagina', has been incorrectly used to describe this. There are two openings within the vulva, one to the urethra (for urine) and one to the vagina.

**Vagina** - the internal muscular tube that leads from the vulva to the womb (uterus). Generally, sperm enter a woman's body and babies are born through the vagina.

### Boys' genitals

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**Penis** - an organ made up of soft spongy tissue which can become erect because of extra blood flow. It has one opening in the tip called the urethra, out of which urine is passed. After puberty, sperm also leave the body through the urethra (but not at the same time as urine).

**Testicles** - small round organs near the penis that produce testosterone and, after puberty, will produce sperm. One of the functions of testosterone is to help boys physically develop into men.

**Scrotum** - the soft skin that holds the testicles.

**Note:** At a later stage, children may be given more detailed information and diagrams of the genitalia and the internal sexual organs.



## Why can't I touch your penis/breasts (or any sexual body parts)?

'The parts of the body that would be covered by a swimsuit are private to each one of us. "private" means just for yourself, and "public" means with other people. We will only ask to touch those parts to help you wash until you are able to do it for yourself or, if you were ill, a doctor might ask to examine you but it will always be with your mum or dad there. If another child or adult asks to see or touch your private body parts or for you to touch theirs, you should always tell us.'

And, to respond to the normal curiosity that your child might have, you could add: 'It's normal for children to be curious about their own and other people's bodies and how they change as a person grows up. Let's look at this book/website together.'

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## Additional resources

### For parents of young children

- **HSE: Sexualwellbeing.ie** is the HSE's sexual health website. It has a section to help parents talk with their children about relationships, sexuality and growing up. [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie)
- **HSE: Caring for Your Child 0–5 years** is a series of information booklets on all aspects of a child's development, including sexual health. [www.mychild.ie](http://www.mychild.ie)
- **Department of Education and Skills: Stay Safe** is a programme that promotes personal safety skills and is taught in most primary schools. Its website has a section for parents. [www.staysafe.ie/parents.htm](http://www.staysafe.ie/parents.htm)

- **Department of Education and Skills: Webwise.ie** offers advice and information for parents to help them promote online safety to their children. [www.webwise.ie/parents/](http://www.webwise.ie/parents/)
  - **NSPCC: PANTS (The Underwear Rule)** is a simple tool for teaching children about personal safety. The UK website contains guides for parents and teachers and a range of materials for children, including an animated video with the PANTS song and a downloadable video game. The children's guides are also adapted for children with disabilities and autism and there is a video for children who are deaf.  
[www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/underwear-rule/](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/underwear-rule/)
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## For parents of adolescents

- **HSE: Sexualwellbeing.ie** is the HSE's sexual health website. It has a section to help parents talk with their children about relationships, sexuality and growing up. [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie)
- **HSE: Busy Bodies** is a free DVD and booklet on puberty. It is commonly used with 5th and 6th class children in school and at home.  
[www.healthpromotion.ie/health/inner/busy\\_bodies](http://www.healthpromotion.ie/health/inner/busy_bodies)
- **HSE: Advice for Mams & Dads – Talking to Teenagers about Relationships & Sex** is a free supplement to assist parents of older adolescents in talking with their teenagers about relationships and sexuality.  
[www.healthpromotion.ie/hp-files/docs/HCP00671.pdf](http://www.healthpromotion.ie/hp-files/docs/HCP00671.pdf)
- **HSE: B4uDecide.ie** is the HSE's website on relationships and sexuality for young people. It also has sections for parents, teachers and youth workers. [www.b4udecide.ie/parents/](http://www.b4udecide.ie/parents/)

## Parenting Courses and Support

- **National Parents' Council – Primary**

The NPC offer parents a training course entitled, *Supporting your child to build healthy friendships and relationships*. This can be accessed online or can be requested as a group training for your school. For more detail see [www.npc.ie/training.aspx](http://www.npc.ie/training.aspx). The NPC also have a helpline for parents on:

**01 887 4477**

- **IFPA- Speakeasy**

The Irish Family Planning Association offers, *Speakeasy*, a course designed to provide parents, guardians and carers with the information, skills and confidence needed to talk to their children openly about relationships, sexuality and keeping safe . They also offer, *Speakeasy Plus* for parents of children with a physical or intellectual disability or with extra support needs. For more detail see [www.ifpa.ie/Education-Training/Programmes](http://www.ifpa.ie/Education-Training/Programmes)

- **One Family**

One Family offer a free one-to-one sexual health awareness programme to support parents in talking with children in a way that nurtures their child's curiosity and supports their developing sexual health and well-being. For more detail see [www.onefamily.ie](http://www.onefamily.ie)

- **BelonG To**

BeLonG To Youth Services is the national organisation supporting young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI+) people and their parents. See [www.belongto.ie](http://www.belongto.ie)

- **TENI**

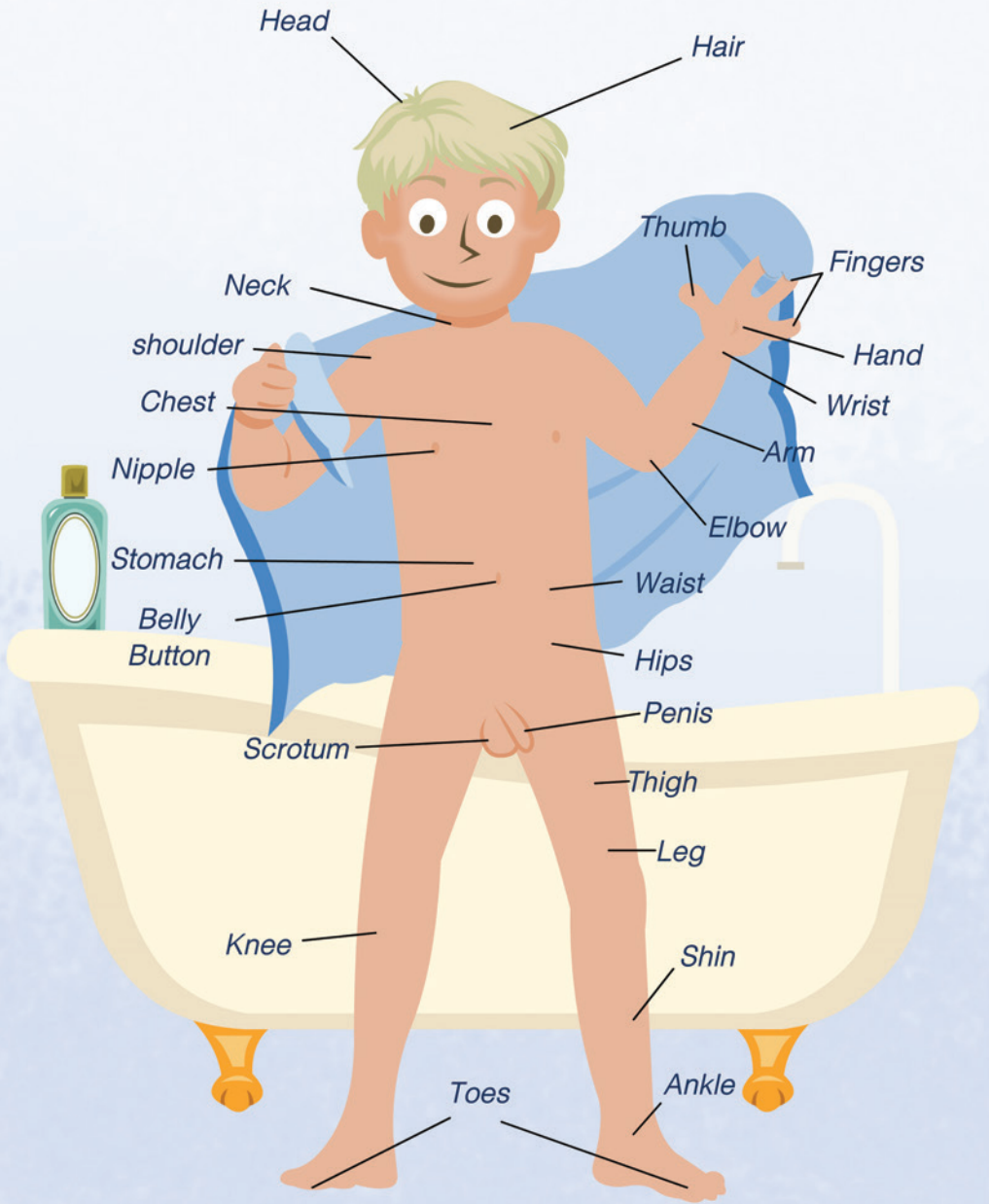
TENI is the national organisation supporting Transgender people, including young Transgender people and their parents. See [www.teni.ie](http://www.teni.ie)



# Girls' and boys' bodies - similarities and differences







## Want to read more?

- The research report that led to the development of this booklet is, *Supporting Parents Communicating with Children Aged 4–9 Years about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up* by Dr Catherine Conlon. The full report and a concise and an easy-to-read, summary of its findings are available at **[www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie)**
- You might also be interested in reading this research report, *Parents' Approaches to Educating their Pre-adolescent and Adolescent children about Sexuality* by Professor Abbey Hyde, Dr. Marie Carney, Dr. Jonathan Drennan, Dr. Michelle Butler, Dr. Maria Lohan and Dr. Etaoine Howlett. The full report is available at **[www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie)**
- The RSE curriculum and support materials for primary schools are available at **[www.pdst.ie/node/811](http://www.pdst.ie/node/811)**.
- The World Health Organization's *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe: a framework for policy makers, educational and health authorities and specialists* is available at **[www.oif.ac.at/fileadmin/OEIF/andere\\_Publikationen/WHO\\_BZgA\\_Standards.pdf](http://www.oif.ac.at/fileadmin/OEIF/andere_Publikationen/WHO_BZgA_Standards.pdf)**.



*The Talking to Your Young Child about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up* resource has been developed to help parents to talk with their children about the basics of relationships and sexuality. It consists of two booklets: this parents' guide and an accompanying story booklet, *Tom's Power Flower: a gentle explanation of how babies are made*.

Both booklets are a response to the research study, *Supporting Parents Communicating with Children Aged 4–9 Years about Relationships, Sexuality and Growing Up*. The study found that many parents wish to educate their children about the body, relationships, sexuality and growing up and want resources from a trusted source, such as the HSE, to support them.

Further support and information may be found at [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie).

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