



## **Puberty 101 for Parents: Talking with Kids about Hormones, Brain Rewiring, and Sex**

Cath Hakanson

Interviewed by Dr. Laura Markham

Dr. Laura Markham ([00:04](#)):

This summit is brought to you with love by Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids. Welcome.

Hi there. I'm Dr. Laura Markham, founder of Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids and organizer of this online summit, nurturing hearts, nurturing minds, the neuroscience of peaceful parenting. Our guest today is Cath Hakanson, an Australian sex educator mom of two, and the founder of Sex Ed Rescue.

([00:30](#)):

Sex Ed Rescue provides accessible down-to-earth information to empower parents with the tools and confidence they need to have open, honest, age-appropriate conversations with their children at every stage of development about sex, relationships, puberty, gender childbirth, and pornography. Our conversation with Cath Hakanson today is puberty 101, how to talk with kids about hormones, brain rewiring, and sex. Welcome to the summit, Cath.

Cath Hakanson ([01:02](#)):

Thanks, Laura. I'm happy to be here.

Dr. Laura Markham ([01:05](#)):

Well, I'm so glad you're here because I think all of us parents need support as our kids approach puberty. Even if we told them where babies come from when they were

four and started asking, it's usually a conversation that's fairly dormant. I'm not saying that's the right way, you'll tell us, but it's fairly dormant until the kids start to approach puberty and puberty seems to be starting earlier and earlier. How can parents initiate conversations about puberty?

Cath Hakanson ([01:38](#)):

Well, first of all, Laura, you are right. I often joke that puberty is one of those conversations that suddenly slap you in the face. It's like parenting is suddenly getting easier. The kids are a delight to parent, and then all of a sudden parents start noticing mood changes or they'll come home from playing sport and they will smell.

([02:00](#)):

And they'll start noticing things or they'll go to pick up the kids from school and while they're waiting for their child, they'll notice some of their friends walk past and the girls will be starting to grow breasts and some of the boys will be starting to have facial hair or be super tall. We often sit there and it's like puberty has slapped us in the face and said, "Hey, it's time to talk about it." It's a conversation that we do all forget to start. I definitely agree with that.

Dr. Laura Markham ([02:32](#)):

Okay, good. We don't have to feel guilty that we didn't get to it or we didn't know how to get to it. But okay, the things that you're describing have just begun to happen and I have an 11-year-old. How do I begin to talk to my 11-year-old boy or girl or whoever?

Cath Hakanson ([02:49](#)):

That is usually the biggest struggle for a lot of parents is as well as, what do I say? But it's how do I start that conversation? Now as a parent, I believe in, we're all busy as parents, why not do things the easy way? The easiest way to start a conversation with puberty is with a book because there's hundreds of them and there's constantly new ones coming out all the time. You can find a good book about puberty and then when they come home from school or on the weekend you can say, "Hey, I bought this book on the weekend. It's about puberty. Do you know what puberty is about?"

([03:26](#)):

They might grunt and ignore you or go, "Oh mum." Or walk out of the room or they might go, "No, mum, what's puberty?" And you can then ease into the book that way. But books are just fantastic because if you're sitting there thinking, hang on, I'm a girl, I don't know what happens to a boy during puberty. I don't have a penis. I don't have wet dreams or nocturnal emissions. A lot of mums freak out because they're, I know

what happens to my body, but I don't know what happens to bodies with a penis. Books are just great because literally you just read what's on the page and you look at it together.

(04:09):

And because it's written for kids, it's written in a way they understand and there's usually pictures or there might be a bit of humor or something as well. It just paves the way and makes it a much easier conversation to get started with the book. That's probably the way that I recommend most parents start just because there's a lot to cover. Puberty is a pretty big topic and there's no way you can cover it in one conversation, but a book basically makes sure that they get a lot of what they need to know.

Dr. Laura Markham (04:42):

What if you have the book and you say, "Do you know what puberty is?" And your kid's like, "Mum, don't be embarrassing." And then you say, "Will you look at the book with me?" And your kid says, "No mum, I'm not going to look at the book with you. You could leave it here." Is that... Go ahead.

Cath Hakanson (05:05):

Yeah, I had that happen just a week ago. I was sent this wonderful new book about puberty and it actually has photographs of real bodies in it, that is incredibly unusual to find. I looked at it and I thought, wow, what a great book. I threw it to my 15-year-old and I said, "Hey mate, here's a book to read." Anyway, I got no response. I'm a bit persistent sometimes. I saw the book again, so I said, "Hey mate, remember that book I threw? Have you had a look at it?" Anyway, he literally threw it back at me and said, "Mum, I don't want to look at a book with pictures of assholes." He said, "I can bend over and have a look at my own."

(05:48):

I live it, I know what it's like. Sometimes kids can be really resistant, but what we have to remember is that we can't give up. Even though kids might turn around and say, "I don't want to look at this book, it's rubbish." Or they ignore you, it doesn't really matter because what matters is that by me showing that book to my son, even though he threw it back at me, it still lets him know that I'm happy to talk about puberty and that if he has a question about assholes, that he can come back and ask me about it.

(06:26):

I guess what's important to remember is that don't give up. A lot of kids will be resistant, but you just have to keep going. Sometimes you have to try different strategies. You might leave the book in their room and the next time you clean up their room, you might find it under their bed covered in dust, which is where I found the books I gave my son. Then sometimes you have to try different strategies. You might be driving in the car because I think most parents can probably experience that or say that some of the best conversations that they have with their kids are when you're driving in the car.

(07:02):

You want to make sure it's not peak hour traffic and the road's really dangerous because sometimes you might start a conversation in the car and they might actually respond. You want to make sure it's safe, that you can focus on the road while also talk about whatever it is that you want to talk about. But you could be driving in the car and you could say, "Hey, I saw Tommy's mum on the weekend and she was saying that puberty is starting for Tommy and that she started to notice all these changes and she told me about a really good book that she'd bought him. What are your thoughts about puberty? Have you noticed if any of your friends' bodies are changing at school?"

(07:39):

They might say nothing, but you just keep trying. Eventually they might respond, or you could be watching a TV show with them and they might be joking about puberty, and then you might go, "Oh, why do you think they're teasing that person over there about puberty?" Then try lead into a conversation that way. Sometimes you've got to try different ways. If the one way you're working isn't working, it's well, what's another way to get them talking or to get information across to them?

Dr. Laura Markham (08:10):

I wonder if the book thing, parents need to maybe order a few books, go to a bookstore and leave through a few books, but probably order a few books online because they're not as readily available. And then take a look at them and maybe start smaller. I could see my son would've been shocked by a book with naked bodies, but he would've been willing to look at a book that was more tame, more introductory, just about bodies changing. But if you could have a good discussion about that as you're reading it together, then maybe go into another book that's more explicit when he's ready for that. Is that right?

Cath Hakanson (08:53):

Yes. Separating sex is a really good idea. I review a lot of puberty books and in my lists, I actually break them up into the books that do talk about sex and the books that don't talk about sex, because sometimes puberty can be so overwhelming for parents that the thought of also explaining sex is almost, let's just throw the conversation in the too hard basket and let's just not talk at all.

(09:17):

I find that it's easier for parents to just talk about puberty and sometimes for kids they are so overwhelmed by the thought of having to do this sex thing that the thought of puberty just freaks them out even more. Keeping it simple and just talking about some of the physical changes that might be happening to your body first are just a nice way to gently ease into the conversation in a way that keeps everyone hopefully happy.

Dr. Laura Markham (09:48):

I know that some of the parents who are listening to us right now are waiting for us to say, "Okay, what are the books? But since you are so aware of all the different books, I think what we'll do is we'll put a link below our interview to your website where you have the book list, and that way parents can really get the full benefit of your recommendations about which kind of books.

Cath Hakanson (10:14):

Because some books are like graphic novels or what we used to know as comics and then you can get ones that are all pictures and some that are words, inclusive books. Recommending puberty books is really tricky because what I think is a good book might not work for your child, but yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham (10:32):

It depends of course on age, but also emotional age as well as chronological age, yeah.

Cath Hakanson (10:38):

Definitely.

Dr. Laura Markham (10:39):

Okay, so let's talk about hormones and the neuroscience of puberty and just so parents understand what's happening and then maybe we can talk about how do you explain that to the child.

Cath Hakanson ([10:55](#)):

Well, puberty is that time where I often joke that it's where the sex tap gets turned on because we've got a child who you might've talked to them about sex, but they still think sex is this really weird thing that adults do. To kids it is pretty disgusting. We might kiss each other's mouths, put our tongues in each other's mouths, might even put our mouths on their private parts and all that sort of stuff. Kids see sex as just this really gross, disgusting, weird things that adults do.

([11:26](#)):

But puberty is that time where it all changes and it's made sense because puberty is that time where kids change from being a child to being an adult. They're changing physically and they become fertile so that they will start reproducing and creating the next generation. But mother nature or evolution is so so so smart because it wants us to breed and to create the next generation so that human life keeps going on and on. To make sure that we'll want to go and do something that is pretty gross and disgusting that adults do, mother nature will turn on the sex tap and the body will start creating hormones which change the way we think but also change our body and the way that we feel and the way that we behave as well.

([12:21](#)):

Part of puberty is your body becomes more like an adult body. You become fertile so that you can create the next generation, but it also makes you start thinking about sex so that you'll want to have it, have a baby and so that's what I... Puberty just makes so much sense when you look at why it happens and what it all means. One of the things that we often forget when we talk to kids about puberty is we talk about the physical changes, but we forget to tell them about the other things that happen, which can be sexual feelings.

([13:02](#)):

The fact that they now will start creating sperm or they'll start having periods which means that they could become pregnant if they're sexually active. I just find that when I can simplify puberty down into why the changes happen, it makes it easy to talk about it yourself to your kids because it makes a lot more sense and it helps with explaining why you might be getting sexual feelings and why sex might suddenly start being something that you might even think that you might want to do one day and it will no longer be seen as totally gross and disgusting.

Dr. Laura Markham ([13:41](#)):

Well, this brings up I think for parents some fear because I can't bear to think of my innocent 11-year-old as a sexually active person. I'm worried my child will be taken

advantage of by other people. I'm worried that they will get in over their head in a situation. I think for the child, there's also a question. If you have just what you just said, if I turn around and say that to my 11 or 12-year-old, let's say even 10 or 11, they might well say, "But I am not interested in sex yet. I don't want to do that. It's still sounds gross. And why is my body getting me ready to do this when I'm not going to be a grown-up until I'm out of high school?" So what do you say to that?

Cath Hakanson (14:31):

That is a great question, and this is where we always have to talk about everyone is different and that's okay. Some people will be thinking about romantic relationships. They might be attracted to someone who's the same sex as them or someone who's a different sex to them, or they might be attracted to no one because some people are asexual where they don't have romantic or sexual attraction to people. And that's normal and healthy and okay as well. I think it's just about reassuring kids and letting them know that your body is really, really smart. It's got you to this stage in life and you've turned out okay.

(15:10):

What you've got to do is you've actually got to trust that your body knows what it's doing and it will make the changes that will happen that it thinks you're ready for. Even though some of your friends might be thinking about sex and other people might be having sex or some of your friends might be having, because if they're 11, they're not going to be sexually active, but some of your friends might have a boyfriend or a girlfriend or romantic relationships. If they want to, that's okay, that's them, but let's worry about what's right for you.

(15:42):

And if you are not ready to have romantic relationships, that's great because there's no rush to hurry up. I always used to talk to my kids about how lots of kids as they go through puberty are in a hurry to grow up because it's the age where they then leave, you call it junior in America, they start in before they go to middle school. Is it elementary?

Dr. Laura Markham (16:06):

It's elementary and then middle school.

Cath Hakanson (16:08):

Yeah, yeah, so middle school is that timing where they leave the little kid's school and they're go into a different school which has got kids that are much older and bigger

than them. It's always, it's crazy timing. I think it's really bad timing, but it usually happens at around the time that puberty is starting. Kids are trying to work out who the heck they are, and then they're thrown into a school environment where everyone is a lot bigger than them.

(16:35):

They're trying to fit in because they're trying to work out who they are or how they fit in with all their friends. They don't want to stand out as being different because they might get picked on and bullied. Puberty is that time where they're trying to work out themselves, but also in their real world, they're thrown in with other kids as well. I always like to talk to my kids and I encourage parents to do the same, but to remind them that some kids are in a hurry to grow up and some kids will look a lot more grown up than they are, but it doesn't matter. You'll catch up when you're ready and it's okay to grow at the rate that you are growing at. Kids sometimes do need that reassurance.

Dr. Laura Markham (17:16):

And they know, for instance, your 13-year-old knows she's not actually ready to become a mother even though her body has now given her that capacity. Do you add in that, there was a time when people died at 45 and you had your babies early and we were living in a tribal culture where the tribe wandered or lived in a cave or whatever? Our bodies are still ready, gearing up, not ready. You're not necessarily ready for a baby at 13, but your body is gearing up, but that doesn't mean you're ready to become a mom. Is that what you would say?

Cath Hakanson (17:54):

Yes, definitely. Yeah. It's that whole thing reassuring kids and telling them that they're actually probably not really an adult who can look after themselves and be independent in the world until they're in their mid 20s. The penis can still be growing when they're 19, 20 or 21.

Dr. Laura Markham (18:13):

Good to know. Good to know. Your body is gearing up, it's starting to get ready. This is a long phase. It's not like tomorrow you'll be ready to get married and have a baby. Okay, great.

Cath Hakanson (18:24):

Takes a very long time to happen, yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham ([18:27](#)):

This is also a question that most parents have. If I talk to my kid about sex so explicitly, aren't they going to be excited about having... You just said the sex tap gets [inaudible 00:18:40], are they going to be more likely to go have sex? Wouldn't it be better to stay mom about the whole thing?

Cath Hakanson ([18:45](#)):

That is a common fear, and this is what I love about sex education is that I can sit here and say, "Yeah, tell your kids what sex is." But I can guarantee you probably won't and you won't because you'll be sitting there thinking, okay, so she's told me to tell my kids what sex are, but maybe if I tell them what sex is, they'll think that I'm actually giving them permission to be sexual. Or they're too innocent, I don't want to destroy their innocence. What tends to happen around the sex conversation is we have all these fears and doubts that we're actually going to harm our kids rather than help them.

([19:22](#)):

What I find is that most parents don't have those conversations because fear stops them. I'm big into helping parents recognize what their fears are and acknowledging that we have fears because our fears show that we care and we love our children. Fears are a good thing, but at the end of the day, kids are going to learn about sex regardless of whether you tell them or not. You look at how society has evolved over the years, but the generation of kids now, I truly believe that these are the kids who need sex education the most because the world has changed and kids are learning about sex from the internet.

([20:08](#)):

They type words in innocently. This is a generation of kids where parents really need to be getting in first, and we really do need to be having these conversations. I think we need to remember that information actually empowers kids. If we think back to our own adolescence and our early sexual days ourself, most of the decisions that parents have made that they regret were made because of ignorance, because we didn't know about sex. We didn't know enough about it so we learnt by making mistakes. I've found that most parents don't want their kids to learn about sex the way that they learnt.

([20:53](#)):

If we can look back at our generation and reflect on the fact that most of us learnt about sex through trial and error and did things that we regretted afterwards, that information actually, it's informed consent. It gives kids enough information to be

able to think about it and then make a decision. Every couple of years they update this research, but all the research says that the kids that are sexually active and are getting pregnant, having to visit STI clinics are the kids that don't get sex education. They're the kids that don't have a parent to talk to.

(21:37):

I know it myself from having worked with parents for so many years, but the parents that are having the conversations, those are the kids that are holding off on sex because they know that they can have sex when they're ready. You've shared values with them, so you might want them to wait until marriage or you might want them to wait until they're in a loving, trusting relationship. But because you've shared values and you've given information to them, they know that they can have sex when they want to have sex, not because everyone else is doing it, not because someone's pressuring them into it. They do it when they're ready.

(22:14):

It's usually later than other teens. And when they do have sex, they're safer and they also enjoy it, and it's more likely to be consensual as well, which is really important. All the research and all the evidence points to a really good outcome. It's not about information's going to make them go off and do everything.

Dr. Laura Markham (22:37):

Right, thank you. I read a recent study of Danish parents who talk about sex earlier and their kids have sex later than American parents, but [inaudible 00:22:49] you talked about being exposed to sex online. There's a lot of sexualized content online, obviously in social media and in other ways. How can parents talk to their kids about that?

Cath Hakanson (23:04):

This is what makes the porn talk so hard. If as parents, if we struggle to talk about sex or how babies are made, and babies are usually made in a loving relationship so if we can't talk about sex, loving, affectionate, pleasurable sex, how the heck can we talk about porn? Because most of us don't associate porn as being romantic. It's entertainment and it's people acting, and it's just like what you see on TV doesn't happen in real life. What you see in porn isn't what happens in most people's bedrooms.

(23:49):

This is where it can get really, really tricky because it's like, how can you talk about porn? The biggest barrier to the porn talk is we have all these fears. I remember

myself when I was writing my porn talk course, and my son, who was 12 at the time, was sitting next to me doing something on his computer. I'm sitting here typing this course up about why you need to talk to your kids about porn and how to do it. I remember looking across at him thinking, do I want to talk to him about porn? I already had, but it was, I knew I needed to talk again because it had been a while.

(24:29):

It was, he's 12, puberty is starting. If I start talking about porn, he's probably going to open up the computer and type in something and he'll be looking at it. I don't want to risk that. I'm sitting here having these thoughts and doubts, and then it was, whoa, hang on, Cath. This is what all parents go through. You are turning this into a harmful conversation, so you're not going to have it. I see this happen to parents all the time. Whenever I do training about the porn talk, my first thing that I address is, okay, what's going to stop you from talking about porn? Let's address some of those fears, first of all, because it doesn't matter what I'm going to say, you are not going to listen if you think that the porn talk is going to harm children.

(25:21):

This is what I've noticed over the years because a lot of the parent coaching I do is parents contact me because their kids have been watching porn and the parents have just discovered and they're totally overwhelmed and don't know what to do. A lot of the coaching I do is around supporting them. The one thing I've noticed over the years is that the kids that don't have a problem with viewing porn are the kids who have got a parent who's found out about it. Because when that parent finds out about it, that parent actually supports them. They listen to how they felt about the porn because they might've been watching something where someone was getting hurt, but they had an erection. It felt like they had sexual feelings while they were watching it, but they were also disgusted by what they saw.

(26:13):

Then they might go to sleep at night thinking that they're a bad person and they'll start feeling guilt and they might start having bad dreams about it, and then they keep thinking of it and they go back and they keep watching it. Kids don't have an adult brain and they really struggle to deal with porn by themselves. When kids are left alone with porn, it can often spiral and it can sometimes spiral to the stage where police are knocking on your door because they've actually been found with child sexual abuse material on their computer because they get groomed as part of porn as well. It can have really horrible outcomes. But what I've noticed is that the parents who discover that their kids have been watching porn will actually sit down, and I

coach them so that they will sit and talk to the kid about how they felt, talk about their feelings.

(27:09):

Then they talk and they unpack what they saw. It might be like, yeah, they probably were hurting each other in that sex that you saw. Some people like to watch that type of porn because they think it's exciting, but that's not the sex that people have in real life. Some kids freak out because they think, what? I'm supposed to do that? That is disgusting. They're so terrified by what they see that it's just so traumatic for some children. But if parents can talk to them, listen to how, it's that heart, head, hands model. Listen to, get their feelings off their chest. The head is give them information, give them facts. Hands is, okay, how can I help you so that you don't keep looking at this stuff again? Or how can I help you so that you don't find porn again?

(28:02):

When these conversations can happen, kids end up having a good relationship with porn, they understand what porn is, and when they're old enough and they start looking at it because at the end of the day, you can't stop them from looking at porn. When they're about 15, 16, it's out of your control.

Dr. Laura Markham (28:02):

You're no longer in control.

Cath Hakanson (28:24):

You're not. If you can have these conversations, it means that when they hit that age where you've got no say in what they do, it means that they're more likely to make an informed and a smarter decision about the porn that they're watching. There's a lot of really good anecdotal evidence and a lot of good research starting to come out that's saying that teenagers actually aren't stupid. A lot of them do know that what they see in porn isn't what happens in real life. Let's give them the benefit of doubt and trust them to make smart decisions, but let's also have some conversations that will help them to make smart decisions as well.

Dr. Laura Markham (29:07):

What you just said, I can imagine terrified a lot of people, the police knocking on the door, that's terrifying.

Cath Hakanson (29:13):

Happens.

Dr. Laura Markham ([29:14](#)):

Yes, it happens in a very small percentage of cases, but it can absolutely happen. But I think what's most common is an eight or nine or 10-year-old gets exposed in some way that no one was expecting. Maybe their friend chose them or they stumble on something, as you said, that they put, I seem to remember that my son was trying to find something for sports equipment when he was, I don't know, 10 years old. He put in, I don't think this exists anymore so I'll go ahead and say it Anaconda, because it was like a baseball glove or something.

([29:51](#)):

Anaconda turned out to be a porn site, came up and he said, "Mom." And I thought, oh my God, I have not appropriately put safeguards on this computer. This was a long time ago, but I realized at this point they could be exposed to anything. We sat down and talked about pornography then, but I didn't do it until he'd already been exposed. Luckily I was in the room and it happened. But my question to you is, since it's going to happen somehow that kids are going to be exposed, what should parents say to kids about porn? What's the short porn conversation to have beforehand?

Cath Hakanson ([30:29](#)):

Yep, starts off when they're little, that sometimes when you're on the internet, you might find things that make you feel uncomfortable, unsafe or scared. It might be a YouTube video and someone might start shooting rabbits and that's scary or it might be a video where people are playing tricks. There's a big thing on YouTube where they jump out and scare each other and then they show the video because it's really funny. It's not funny for the kid that got scared. You talk about this sort of stuff.

([31:02](#)):

You start the conversation early by letting them know that sometimes you'll find stuff when you're playing online that's not good for kids. Stuff that might scare you. Then you build into the conversation that sometimes you might see your kids sitting there at the computer and they're playing something on YouTube, and you might go, "Oh, what are you watching? Oh, are you watching those ones again? Did you know that sometimes when you're watching videos on YouTube, you might actually find videos where people have got no clothes on? Has that ever happened?"

Dr. Laura Markham ([31:34](#)):

Great question.

Cath Hakanson ([31:34](#)):

You might talk about that because you don't want to always call it porn because porn's a word that most kids probably only hear two or three times a year if that. You can guarantee if you only talk about porn, they'll forget what porn is because it's not a common everyday word. You talk about they might find naked people and then when they know what sex is, you might say they might be watching that video. And you go, "Oh, what are you watching?" And they'll go, "Go away, mum, stop talking." And you'll go, "Oh, I heard something on the radio the other day about how sometimes you can find porn on YouTube. Do you know what porn is?"

([32:11](#)):

And they'll go, no, or yes or ignore you. And you might go, "Oh, well porn is when people have sex. They're actors that have sex for a job and they sell it and people watch it." And so you might lead into it that way. It can be something just haphazard or you can get a book and there's a couple of really good books that help you have a porn conversation with your kids.

Dr. Laura Markham ([32:39](#)):

Beautiful. Beautiful. We'll have the link to that as well. That sounds great. That'd be-

Cath Hakanson ([32:42](#)):

So much easier because it explains porn in a way that makes sense to kids. So yeah, it's a tricky conversation to have and it's a conversation that you have to keep having because kids forget what you talk about. I've had that happen myself.

Dr. Laura Markham ([33:05](#)):

With the rise of social media and the sexualized content that's available everywhere, TikTok, is this a conversation that's an ongoing, not just pornography, but sex in general and the sexualized nature of everybody's got to be hot and we need to be attracting the sexual attention of other people, are these conversations that you have with kids on an ongoing basis?

Cath Hakanson ([33:32](#)):

I think so. It can be little things like you might go clothes shopping. And sometimes in children's clothing you might be looking at the shirts and it might go, I'm a hot babe or something. It might be a top that's a midriff. And so sometimes with clothes shopping, if you've coming across clothing that is sexualized and that you don't want

your children wearing, these can be conversations where you can start talking about your values and beliefs about what's okay and what's not.

(34:08):

Sexualization is out there and ignoring it is probably the worst thing you can do. I think as parents, it's about, if anything, sex education is actually easier to do because this sexualized world we are living in is constantly slapping you in the face and saying, talk about me, here's something to talk about. You're driving in the car listening to trashy mainstream radio because usually at peak hour they have the DJs where they start talking about sex. They do in Australia anyway, and people ring in and they share their stories.

(34:48):

I stopped listening to commercial radio when my kids were younger because you turn the radio on, then all of a sudden they'd be talking about oral sex and it'd be like, whoa, let's listen to something else. But when my kids got older, I started turning that radio on and we'd be listening to something and I'd go, "Hey, did you just hear what they said about oral sex? Do you know what oral sex is? Have you heard that word before?" And so listening to trashy commercial radio at peak hour was fantastic because it gave me all these opportunities to talk about things.

(35:22):

It meant that I didn't forget to talk about it because we were stuck in traffic so we would talk about it, but it's actually much easier to have conversations with our kids because there's just so many opportunities to address stuff. Kids might come home and they might go, "Mum, I want to watch." They might mention some show that all the other kids are watching and they're only eight. And you know that this is a show that's rated M and that there's actual sex scenes in it because you've gone to Common Sense Media and you've checked it out and they've said, "Whoa, no, it's for bigger kids."

(35:56):

And the kids are coming, your daughter, your son, your child's coming home and saying, "But all the other kids are watching it. Why can't I watch it?" That's where you're coming in with your values and you're talking about the fact of, well, you know what? I'm a mum who cares. I've actually gone and have it, let's go have a look at what Common Sense Media say. Sorry, I hope you don't mind me mentioning them.

Dr. Laura Markham (36:18):

No, not at all. They're great.

Cath Hakanson ([36:19](#)):

Oh, I used to train my kids, they'd go, "Can I watch something?" And I'd go, "Okay, go grab my phone. Look up Common Sense Media and tell me what it says about it." I wouldn't even go look it up myself. The kids would sometimes even turn up to me with my phone and the show already looked up on Common Sense Media so we could then have a conversation about it. It was great because they were the bad people, not me. I was just doing what they told me to do.

([36:49](#)):

The kids would often throw their resentment at Common Sense Media, not at me because here was this place on the internet saying that that was a show for older kids. But sometimes you've got to, you can turn that into an opportunity to talk about, well, I'm a parent who actually thinks about what you watch, the movies you watch, and it's important to me that you watch movies that you can easily understand and movies that are created for kids your age. Your brain and your body is not yet ready to watch adult stuff. If other parents want their kids to watch that stuff, well that's their decision but-

Dr. Laura Markham ([37:31](#)):

In our family.

Cath Hakanson ([37:31](#)):

This is what we do in our house.

Dr. Laura Markham ([37:33](#)):

Beautiful. You're including your values in all of these discussions and guidance.

Cath Hakanson ([37:38](#)):

Oh, definitely.

Dr. Laura Markham ([37:38](#)):

I noticed you just said your brain, your body is not quite ready. Let's talk a little more about those conversations about the brain and body because at puberty, the brain and body both change. We've talked about the body changes more, but the brain actually rewires. Now we know many parents watching this will know that what happens is it's like the neural pathways that are used the most get myelinated to work faster, but there are other things that happen that have to do with the peer

group. What else is happening at puberty in the brain that we need to talk to our kids about it.

Cath Hakanson ([38:16](#)):

Yeah, well, and I think this is why we need to talk to kids about brain development as well, because some days our kids will come home and they will have made great decisions during the day, or they'll come home and talk to you about something and they will be really mature and responsible and make a great decision. A week later, they might be in the same situation and they make a stupid decision or they do something that you just did not expect.

([38:44](#)):

And you're sitting there looking at them and thinking, what the heck's going on? Normally they can do this, but now they can't. What's going on? Where am I going wrong? But you're not doing anything wrong. Their brain is just doing what they're doing and when they come home, because if you're going to have lots of ongoing conversations, it means that you are watching their back. And it means that when they come home from school, if they've had a really bad day and they've screwed up or done something that's really embarrassing that everyone laughed at, rather than sitting there thinking about it and feeling really bad about themselves, there's a very good chance that they might actually come home and tell you about it. Because they know they can tell you this stuff because they have in the past and you've listened and you've never judged.

([39:31](#)):

When they can explain some of this stuff to you or they're whinging about something that their friends do, I always go back to brain development. I go, "Well, hang on, your friend's 15. They're not an adult. Their brain's still developing. So sometimes they're going to do good stuff and sometimes they're going to do crazy stuff. Well, it's life. It is what it is. It's just something that happens and you can't change what mother nature or science is doing inside there."

Dr. Laura Markham ([40:06](#)):

I wonder if a parent listening to us is saying, well, you're giving my kid permission to exercise bad judgment. You can't change it. "Oh, mom, my brain is still developing."

Cath Hakanson ([40:18](#)):

Oh, some kids will. But I think it depends on the conversations and on the child as well, because if you've been having these conversations for a long time, yeah, look, I

think some kids might take advantage of it, but at the end of the day, I think as a parent, we know our child best. If you think it's an excuse that they could turn into, you might decide not to have that conversation but-

Dr. Laura Markham ([40:50](#)):

I think you could probably just answer it and say, "You know what? It makes sense that sometimes your brain is going to want to hang out with your friends more than to do what you agreed with me you were going to do after school. I understand that, and I count on you to keep your commitments because that's what we do as a family."

Cath Hakanson ([41:10](#)):

Yes, definitely.

Dr. Laura Markham ([41:12](#)):

"I know it's hard. I know it's hard, especially when you're having to train your mind and your brain to do these things." I think there's a way to do it.

Cath Hakanson ([41:22](#)):

You are the parenting guru and you've just come back with that beautifully because, and this is where sex ed sometimes gets tricky because it's often, it's a parenting style. Because if I am teaching parents to talk to their kids about love, sex, and relationships, if you're talking about those things, it means that you're talking about other things, which means that you've got an open and honest style of parenting. You've got a style of parenting that's respectful of children. I often think that sex ed is a parenting style. It's because how we do sex ed is pretty much how we parent.

Dr. Laura Markham ([42:08](#)):

I love that because I've been sitting here thinking that when you're saying talking about sex, I've been thinking your child is only going to come home and share these things with you if as you said, they've had prior conversations that proved to them it was safe to do that. Talking about sex just depends on talking about everything. In fact, I'm thinking about the parent with the book. My mother gave me a book and then she said, "Did you have any questions about the book?" I knew it was not safe to ask my mother questions. I said, no, that's that.

([42:38](#)):

Not that I didn't have questions, but I wasn't going to tell her my questions. I think that being able to count on our kid asking us questions or bringing home those difficult

moments, really what has to happen first is we have to have established a relationship where we listen more than we talk, where when they do tell us something that we're shocked by, we calm ourselves down. That is one of the questions I wanted to ask you. What if your child brings up questions or topics that you find uncomfortable or unexpected? If you're at the dinner table with grandma and they say, "What is oral sex?" Or, "What do Uncle Johnny and his boyfriend do in bed?" Or whatever, what do you do at that moment?

Cath Hakanson ([43:21](#)):

It's like playing Monopoly where you've got that get out of jail card. You always have that sentence that you come out with. That's a great question, but how about we talk about that later on? Just because they ask a question doesn't mean that you have to answer it then and there. What I often used to say to my kids was, because I have a really bad memory and I forget things, I would say to them, "Look, that's a great question, but I'm trying to drive and you know I need to concentrate in peak hour traffic, or we'll have an accident. How about you ask me that question when we get home? But because I often forget things, you might have to remind me that you asked that question so I can answer it when we get home because I'll probably forget that you asked it."

([44:08](#)):

Because it's really important to follow up. It's okay to forget occasionally, but if you are always forgetting, kids get that unspoken message, every time I ask mum or dad a question about sex or puberty, they always go, "We'll talk about it later." And they never do. I actually don't think they want to talk about it. I'll just stop asking questions which is what happens-

Dr. Laura Markham ([44:35](#)):

So important to remember to bring it up later. Now, what about those cross gender conversations? You said in the beginning of our conversation that mom may feel like, well, I don't know how to talk to a boy about wet dreams. I know my husband certainly wasn't going to talk to my daughter about getting her period. How do we help parents? Because I have known dads who talked to their daughters about that, and it was great. It really strengthened their relationship. What do we say to parents about talking to their kids across gender lines about their bodies?

Cath Hakanson ([45:10](#)):

Yeah, I think a lot of parents, because that might've been what happened to them, my brother said my father just threw them a couple of Playboy magazines and that was their sex ed conversation.

Dr. Laura Markham ([45:20](#)):

Oh my gosh.

Cath Hakanson ([45:22](#)):

Whereas apparently my mother talked to me, but I was so young, I don't remember, most of us remember mums talk to the girls and dads talk to the boys. When we have kids ourselves, sometimes some parents will feel that it's more appropriate for dad to talk to the boys and mum to talk to the girls. But what happens with sex education is 9.9999 times out of 10, it's usually the mums that are having the conversations and are starting the conversations about sex and puberty.

([45:59](#)):

I think the approach that I encourage parents is that whoever wants to talk should talk regardless of whether you've got the same body parts as them or not. This is where books are fantastic because you can both read and learn together. If there's a question you can't answer, well when they go to bed that night, you can Google it, find the answer and talk about it the next day. That's probably the approach that I would take because if you are sometimes waiting for another parent to have the conversation, if you are struggling to start it yourself, it's possible that they're finding it even harder to start. It's better if you just take the bull by the horns and start the conversation yourself.

Dr. Laura Markham ([46:49](#)):

Since I said cross-gender, I should acknowledge that there's much more gender fluidity and openness about different sexual orientations today. How can parents not freak out if it's not what they expected, but support their kids as they grow into, explore and come to understand their own unique sexual orientation and gender identity?

Cath Hakanson ([47:15](#)):

Yes. I'm glad you've brought this one up, Laura, because I've got a background in sexology. I've done my masters, I've done research projects, and the one thing I learned very early on in sex research was don't always trust the reference. Go back and find out who they got it from. Because most of the research and the stats in sex

is based on research from ages and ages and ages and ages ago. I've totally lost my train of thought. What was your question?

Dr. Laura Markham ([47:50](#)):

Well, I was talking about kids finding their own-

Cath Hakanson ([47:53](#)):

Gender, sorry, gender-

Dr. Laura Markham ([47:55](#)):

Gender identity and sexual orientation.

Cath Hakanson ([47:56](#)):

Yes. A lot of the research and a lot of the knowledge that we know about child development and development in regards to gender is based on the model where if a child is born with a penis, it's a boy and they identified as a boy. If they were born with a vulva, they would be called a female and a girl. That's just what it was. It was black and white. Now, sometimes there might be what they called transsexuals where a man might dress and pretend they're a woman, and that was all hush hush. People wouldn't talk about that much because it was not polite conversation. A lot of what we know about gender is based on a mindset from 20, 30 years ago.

Dr. Laura Markham ([48:47](#)):

A lot.

Cath Hakanson ([48:48](#)):

Whereas now, and I think we can thank the internet for this, we now know a lot more about sexuality where there's countries where there have been five or six or even 10 genders for hundreds of years. And so I think that we are now in a stage where we know that just because you're born with a penis, there's a very good chance that you'll feel like a boy. But when you're older and you've had a chance to think about your gender, and this might be when you're four or five, nine or 10, 17, you might be 40 or 50, but one day you might think about your gender and realise that the gender you've been assigned doesn't feel right. And that's okay.

([49:39](#)):

If kids are expressing a gender that isn't the gender that they were assigned at birth that you refer them to, it's just about going with the flow. It's about sitting there and

being curious. If you've got a four-year-old and he wants to dress up, he wants to dress up like a princess, you can't blame him. Sparkles, there's lights that flash in some of the costumes that you can get, and it's pretty and it's colorful. Let him go with it. I saw a picture on Facebook of a friend, and when he was four, I bought him the most beautiful pair of pink high heels and a cape with his name on it. It was all pink and lovely because his dad thought boys had to be boys. I decided to get him something girly.

(50:28):

Saw a picture of him on Facebook, and he's a real blokey bloke and wanting to wear pink high heels and pretty girly stuff when he was four, hasn't harmed him at all. He's very comfortable in his gender. I think we need to allow kids to use their imagination. If it's imagination, if it's just a stage they're going through and they're pretending, that's fine. If it isn't, it's just about being curious and going with it. If it's something that they're being persistent about, that's when you might hop on the internet or mention it to the child health nurse to see or the family doctor to see what your next steps are. Because if you are finding out that there's some gender fluidness or their gender's not what you thought it was, you probably want to start thinking about it before puberty starts because puberty is where children are asexual.

(51:34):

My son had beautiful long blonde hair and looks like a girl, and when he was about eight, he decided to get his hair cut off. And I said, "Why?" He said, "Because I'm sick of telling people I'm not a girl." And so that was his way of dealing with it.

Dr. Laura Markham (51:50):

Yes, children are usually asexual, but they can absolutely have strong feelings about their gender identity from the time they're very.

Cath Hakanson (52:00):

And it's not until puberty that you start to have sex-related physical changes. You can put a kid in a dress or some boy clothes and most people would accept their gender as what they guess it at, but it's really hard to put someone-

Dr. Laura Markham (52:16):

Who's 16.

Cath Hakanson (52:18):

Binding chests, having periods, it can be really challenging for kids. It's something that the general consensus is be open-minded, be curious, don't be judgmental. It might be a stage, but it might not be. You saying it's a stage can sometimes give the unspoken message to your child that you don't take it seriously-

Dr. Laura Markham ([52:45](#)):

Matter of fact.

Cath Hakanson ([52:45](#)):

Therefore it's not okay to tell you.

Dr. Laura Markham ([52:48](#)):

But it does sound like parents, I've spoken to so many parents of four-year-old boys fathers specifically of four-year-old boys who get a little worried about the pink sparkly thing. Seen so many four-year-old boys go through this. I guess I would say to those parents, take a breath, relax. Your child is uniquely who they are. They were born who they are. There's nothing you're going to say to make them one way or the other. You can just accept all of their various interests. My daughter was really into ballet and then she wasn't.

([53:23](#)):

They all will be into something and then not into something. And so there are many phases they will go through. As you say, if something's persistent, then we support them. If she had loved ballet and then she would've had ballet her whole life. I'm trying to pick something that's sort of innocuous, that would be common, because I think parents get worried about what it means for the future. The truth is the uniqueness of their child is not something they're going to be able to impact. What they can impact is what their child does with that uniqueness. It's the values of the child and the heart of the child and the child's ability to manage themselves and make choices that are healthy for them. Those are the things that we as parents can impact.

Cath Hakanson ([54:12](#)):

Kids that have got the support of a parent, the outcomes are so positive because so many kids will end their life during adolescence or end up self-harming, depression and anxiety, and they often-

Dr. Laura Markham ([54:27](#)):

If they don't have the support.

Cath Hakanson ([54:28](#)):

If they don't have parent support. If they've got parent support, it has a huge positive impact on them so it's important.

Dr. Laura Markham ([54:38](#)):

I think that's a really great way to end our conversation is that our job as parents is the support. And elsewhere in this summit, we talk a lot about the emotional support and the co-regulation, but if we're starting to think about things that raise our blood pressure a little bit with fear where we don't feel safe because all of a sudden their body is changing, maybe the real takeaway for parents here is work on your own stuff first. And then you can have all of the beautiful ongoing conversations that you've told us we need to have with our child. Is that correct?

Cath Hakanson ([55:15](#)):

Yes, definitely. But that's parenting, isn't it?

Dr. Laura Markham ([55:15](#)):

Yes.

Cath Hakanson ([55:18](#)):

It brings out all the skeletons in the closet. You grow as a person yourself.

Dr. Laura Markham ([55:23](#)):

Yes, so true.

Cath Hakanson ([55:24](#)):

Which I think is lovely.

Dr. Laura Markham ([55:25](#)):

So true. It's the great gift of parenting that in fact we end up growing up. We didn't know that when we got into it, but it is that hidden gift. Well, Cath, thank you so much. Let me ask you, I know that you will put the link to your website and the books and on your porn talk, we'll want to put the porn talk link to your course. Did you have a free gift that you were sharing with folks?

Cath Hakanson ([55:55](#)):

Yes.

Dr. Laura Markham ([55:56](#)):

Yes, tell it.

Cath Hakanson ([55:56](#)):

What I find the biggest barrier to sex education is what the heck do I do? Because my parents didn't talk to me or it was just one talk. It can be really hard to start sex ed when you don't actually know what the heck it is you're supposed to be doing. I have this really nice, simple 30 minute straight to the point crash course webinar on what sex ed is, why you need to do it, what to chat about, when and why, and how, and all that sort of stuff in 30 minutes, which I was pretty impressed with.

Dr. Laura Markham ([56:30](#)):

Beautiful. And so parents watching can go to the link below our interview here to get that free gift and have a little more foundation to feel comfortable embarking on this project.

Cath Hakanson ([56:42](#)):

Definitely. You're not alone with sex education. There's lots of resources to help you. So do it the easy way, not the hard way.

Dr. Laura Markham ([56:50](#)):

Wonderful. Cath, thank you so much.

Cath Hakanson ([56:53](#)):

Thank you.