

Should You Be Naked in Front of Your Kids?

Yes

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Published in Winter 2004 issue of *Brain, Child* magazine

As I bent over my almost three-year-old son in the shower the other day to help him soap up, he smiled broadly, reached up, and cupped my dangling breasts in his hands.

“What’s these, Mama? What’s these?”

“Those are my breasts and nipples, remember? You have nipples too, see?” This isn’t the first time we’ve discussed this particular anatomical feature, but his aren’t nearly as interesting as mine.

“Yours are BIG, Mama!”

Penelope Leach (*Your Baby and Child*) thinks this scene is no big deal. What to Expect the Toddler Years thinks I’m pushing the bounds of propriety. Depending on whether or not you think Adam and Eve got what they deserved from their disappointed God/parent, you’ll think this scene is either cute, or shameful.

I guess I think God didn’t follow the concept of “logical consequences” for misbehavior. Really, as punishment for Adam and Eve partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the human race should have been deprived of fruit. Instead, we’ve been forced to shoulder the burden of clothes.

I want my son to grow up to be comfortably familiar with the human figure. I believe that seeing his parents nude when it naturally happens around the house (bathing, showering, changing clothes, going potty, sleeping), or when we’re in places where nudity is called for (wilderness hot springs, a friend’s sauna, certain beaches), will teach him to respect his own body as it grows and changes.

Hopefully, by the time he’s an adolescent, he won’t giggle and leer when the occasional female breast makes an appearance in his vicinity. Been there, seen that.

I learned as a college student in Europe that shedding one’s clothes doesn’t have to be sexually charged. Nudity in the right context can be wholesome and child-like, but wonderfully adult, as close to pre-shame Adam and Eve as we’ll ever come. We only have to read the Song of Solomon to remember that our bodies are still a source of celebration.

There I lay, topless, in the sunshine next to a lake outside of Winterswijk, Netherlands, next to my nude Dutch friends. Nearby, a nude mother and father picnicked and played Frisbee with their children. I don’t remember what the pre-adolescent boy and a girl, were wearing. I don’t know what they were saying, because I don’t speak Dutch. But I do know they were spending a lovely summer day together, laughing a lot, and what they were not wearing mattered not a bit.

A few weeks later, alone, I gathered my courage on the beach not far from Bordeaux, France, to shed my bikini top once again. I untied the strings, dropped it to the sand. Men walked by. Boys walked by. They didn’t even glance my way. I lay down on my towel, face up, and relaxed.

What a revelation, to be naked, and nonchalant!

I'm not surprised to read that in countries (such as France, Sweden, and the Netherlands) where there is acceptance of nudity, the rate of teenage pregnancy and abortion is approximately half that of the United States. The difference could not be traced to any factor (such as availability of abortion, or the poverty rate) except the difference in cultural attitudes towards nudity and sexuality.

Furthermore, several scholarly studies of the topic, most notably an 18 year study by Okami, Olmstead, and Abramson, published in the Journal of Sex Research in 1997 and the Archives of Sexual Behavior in 1998, show that children are not harmed by naturally occurring family nudity, and that in fact, there are many benefits for children, such as increased self-confidence, positive body images, and healthier attitudes toward sexuality.

Soon after college I learned that even in the United States there were places like those Edens I found overseas; hot springs in the mountains outside Missoula, Montana, where I hiked with friends and relatives regularly. We stripped, lowered ourselves into the steaming pools on the edge of an icy stream, and knew bliss. I can hardly wait until our son is old enough to make the hike with us so he can know it too.

I'd wanted this kind of freedom since I was ten, when I realized with a fierce sense of injustice that my brothers could walk around shirtless but I couldn't, because I was a girl. In protest one summer day I rode my pony around our neighborhood on the edge of town, topless. I still looked like a boy, so no one said anything, but still, I'd made the point to myself.

Shift the scene to where I live now, in Moscow, Idaho, where last summer a small group of enterprising college students organized a topless car wash to pay the rent. They lasted about two weeks, shifting their location daily; that was all the time it took for the conservative-leaning city council to pass a new anti-nudity ordinance, complete with a detailed description of the obscene portion of the female breast.

Breast feeding is still allowed under the ordinance, barely (no pun intended). I can't help but think that if these council members had, as children, seen their parents naked sometimes, they could've moved on to more pressing civic business than telling half the population what they can and can not wear.

Growing up in a house with four older brothers, an older sister, and one bathroom, my exposure to naked people was frequent and unremarkable. When the question of Playing Doctor arose in the neighborhood, I declined to participate. Why bother?

And, when a boy I knew offered to show me his if I showed him mine, I also declined. Being familiar with nudity doesn't make one an exhibitionist, after all. I realize now, though, that that disappointed boy probably had to find some contraband Penthouse magazines to find out what he wanted to know. Now there's a source of reliable anatomical information. In light of how popular media portrays the human body, I think my husband and I owe it to our child to let him see us unclothed, just to keep his expectations realistic.

Explaining the birds and the bees to Reed in a few years will not be easy, but at least he'll know that his father and I know what we're talking about, because we won't have been pretending all this time that our bodies don't exist.