

Sexual development in early childhood

Acknowledging childhood sexuality allows you to understand and accept childhood sexual behaviour and respond positively.

Humans are sexual beings from the day they are born until the day they die. Children do have a natural curiosity about their bodies and those of others and enjoy touching and having different parts of their body touched. They do not though, experience sexual desire in the same way as adults.

Acknowledging childhood sexuality helps you to understand and accept childhood sexual behaviour and to be able to talk about feelings and behaviours when they happen.

What happens when?

Under three's

Even before birth a female baby's vagina will lubricate and a male baby's penis will become erect.

It is normal and healthy for young babies to explore and touch their bodies, including their genitals, in a pleasurable way. Even at this young age children will be developing positive or negative messages about their bodies by the way they are cuddled, touched and spoken to.

By observing the behaviour of parents and other adults, they are learning many attitudes about relationships and sexuality. Gradually they learn the expected socialised behaviours for boys and girls and may display these sex roles in their games and behaviour. Towards the age of three they may show an increased interest in their genitals and the genitals of others and may be fascinated by watching others go to the toilet, sometimes trying to imitate the other sex.

Three to five-year-olds

With expanding language skills and social contacts, children in this age group show increased curiosity about themselves and their bodies. They may show an awareness of body differences and ask questions about these. For example, girls may ask why they don't have a penis. Questioning may also include *How are babies made?* and *How does the baby get out of the mummy?* This curiosity allows for gradual discussion about the names and functions of body parts as well as simple information about fertilisation, pregnancy and birth.

Sexual play such as, *Show me yours and I'll show you mine* is quite common. It is also common for children to role-play relationships and gender roles that they observe around them.

Similarly they may begin to use swear words or 'toilet' words, and repeat jokes they have overheard. As children approach school age they begin to develop a sense of what is considered acceptable behaviour. While many children will masturbate, they generally understand that it is not appropriate to do this in public, although for some the concept of public and private may need to be gently reinforced.

Five to eight-year-olds

Children of this age group may continue to engage in sex play and exhibitionism. This could include games at school, in the playground or in the toilet, such as peering under toilet doors. Sexual exploration may occur with children of the other or same sex.

Social groups tend to be mainly of the same sex, although children commonly tease and show off to the other sex. Towards middle primary school, friendships start to play an increasingly important role. The beginning of peer group pressure may be noted, with some children wishing to conform to their peer group's style of dress and speech. Children may show a strong interest in male and female roles and demonstrate this by copying the behaviour of a parent or other close adult.

Generally children enjoy hearing about their own birth and what they were like as a baby and most will show a great interest in fertilisation, pregnancy and birth. However, some children may have learnt that this is a 'rude' subject to ask about. This may prevent them from asking questions about these issues or cause them to giggle with embarrassment when they are spoken about.

Some eight or nine-year-olds, particularly girls, may show early signs of puberty, so it is important that they have received plenty of information and reassurance, not only about the physical changes of puberty, but the emotional and social changes as well.

Encourage them to understand that everyone is different and to respect these differences. It is also a good time to talk in more detail about sex, pregnancy and birth, as well as privacy and personal safety. Include in your discussions your personal feelings and beliefs and any experiences that you feel comfortable sharing. Give children the opportunity to talk about what they believe. This allows them to begin formulating their own values and expressing their beliefs.

Responding to specific behaviours

Specific behaviours during early childhood sexual development include sexual play, masturbation, swearing, sex jokes and dressing up as the other sex.

Sexual play

Many parents are surprised, even shocked, when they discover their children engaging in some form of sex play or exploration. This reaction may result from seeing the behaviour through adult eyes, interpreting these games as having a sexual intent. Generally such behaviour in children is motivated by curiosity.

How you react to these situations will give your children very strong messages about sexuality. For example, reacting with anger, disgust or by punishing the child could cause the child to feel guilty, ashamed or confused. If the situation is responded to with casual questioning such as *Are you pretending you are grown up?* or *Tell me about the game you are playing*, you are approving of your child's curiosity while giving yourself the opportunity to gather information and discuss it.

You may then wish to discuss issues of privacy and personal safety with your child and set limits as to what is and isn't OK. For example, if your daughter was playing 'doctor' and examining a friend's genitals you could say something like: *I see you are examining John just like the doctor does. But his penis is private, so he should keep his pants on when he is playing. If you want to know what boys look like then perhaps we can find some pictures to look at together.*

Reading books for children about sexuality might also satisfy a child's curiosity.

Masturbation

It is quite usual for children of all ages to touch their genitals. They may do this out of curiosity, because it feels good, to relax or to provide comfort when they are upset, tired or bored.

Some children don't masturbate at all, some will occasionally and for others it might be a regular activity.

Masturbation is quite normal and harmless. Scolding or punishing a child for masturbating will not stop this behaviour; rather it is likely to continue, but with feelings of guilt and shame. If you notice your child masturbating it is probably best if you ignore it. Generally by the time a child is ready for school they have learnt that it is not appropriate to touch their genitals in public. If this is not the case, it may be necessary to point out that while it is OK to touch themselves, it is a private activity and should be done in their bedroom with the door closed. For example, you could say, *I know it feels good to touch your vulva/penis, but it is a private part of your body. People usually touch the private parts of their body when they are alone in a private place. Can you name a private place?*

Swearing and sex jokes

When young children swear or tell sex or 'toilet' jokes, it is usually in response to words that they have heard others use. Commonly it is to show off to their friends or to see what they can get away with in front of you or other adults. Unless it is a common occurrence, it is probably best to ignore it. If it continues you may need to discuss the meaning of the words they are using and how they are offensive to you or other people.

As children move towards puberty, swearing may become more explicit. This may be an expression of their emerging sexual feelings or one way of displaying their newfound 'maturity' to their peer group. They are probably all using these words! This sense of belonging is important at this age, but if swearing becomes excessive or if it is upsetting you perhaps you could negotiate guidelines, such as confining such talk or jokes to when they are with friends and in relatively private places.

Sometimes swearing and writing swear words in public places are expressions of anger. It is important that children are encouraged not to

associate feelings of anger or frustration with sex. Help them identify things that make them feel angry and discuss healthy ways of responding to different situations. Encourage them to express their emotions by talking about the way they feel.

Dressing up as the other sex

Young children enjoy dressing up and acting out roles. This may include dressing up or taking the role of the other sex. Children should be encouraged to feel comfortable with all sorts of play.

Self protection

Children can learn from a young age the information and skills needed to help prevent sexual abuse or exploitation. Most importantly, parents and carers need to develop an open and trusting relationship so that the children in their care feel comfortable talking with them about anything. Self protection skills to teach children include teaching the names of the private body parts: bottom, penis, scrotum, testicles, vulva and vagina; teaching children that their body belongs to them and helping children to identify adults they can trust and talk to.

Children are not responsible for their own safety. It is our job to teach them that adults can help. If you are concerned about a child's behaviour or if a child has been sexually abused, it is important to seek professional help.

Many programs have been developed to teach personal safety to young children – ask at your child's school or early childhood centre if a program is included in their curriculum. If it isn't, you could encourage the school to set one up.

Where do I go for more information about sexuality and self protection education?

Visit www.true.org.au for further information and resources.

Disclaimer

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