

# Age Appropriate Sexual Behavior

## Age-appropriate sexual knowledge and behaviors in children

It can be tough to acknowledge your child's emerging sexuality. It's an important topic to address, however. Understanding your child's behaviors, needs, fears and attitudes related to sex can help you:

- judge your child's readiness for information
- assess what your child knows and correct any inaccuracies
- assure your child that he or she is developing normally
- anticipate future issues or concerns your child may face

**Preschoolers** From ages 2 to 5, children often have an interest in gender differences and where babies come from. They may have questions about their own bodies or others' bodies. Many preschoolers have a firm sense of their gender identity, but may not realize they'll be the same gender when they're older.

Preschoolers don't typically know the correct terms for sexual body parts, and they're often unaware of sexual functions for sexual body parts. However, most preschoolers are aware of elimination functions and have knowledge of limited sexual behavior, such as kissing, hugging and holding hands.

Some preschoolers may have an early understanding of masturbation through innocent exploration of their bodies. Exhibitionistic and voyeuristic behaviors are common at this age, such as touching themselves in public settings or watching others hugging and kissing.

**School age** By ages 6 to 12, a child's gender identity based on his or her genitalia is typically well established. By age 10, children usually know the correct terminology for genitalia. They're usually very curious about sexual and reproductive functions. Boys often become aware of their own erections before age 10. Between ages 10 and 12, about half of children have some understanding of sexual touching and sexual intercourse. Masturbation among children this age is common in private, but rare in public.

For both boys and girls, there's often an increased need for modesty when dressing and bathing. "Dirty words" are also common, especially between ages 5 and 8, but they're not used in a sexual context. Later, sexual language may be used to discuss sexual acts.

Playmates of either gender but the same age may engage in sex play and sexual games, especially between ages 6 and 8. The games are generally cooperative and limited to a few episodes of playing "doctor" or "mommy and daddy," often including kissing, hugging, role playing, fondling or exhibitionism.

**Adolescents** By ages 13 to 16, a child's gender identity is often firmly established. Most children of this age use correct terminology for body parts and understand sexual functions. Girls often become aware of penile erections between ages 12 and 15. By age 13, most children know about masturbation and sexual intercourse.

During adolescence, there's often a focus on sexual values, relationships and making personal decisions. Sexual exploration with peers is common, including open-mouth kissing, fondling, simulated sex and oral sex. About one-third of adolescents have had sexual intercourse.

**Coping strategies for parents** For children to make healthy choices regarding sexuality throughout their lives, they must be encouraged to take care of their bodies, ask information from trusted adults, and respect themselves and other people. Children who understand their sexuality are better able to cope with their feelings and peer pressure, take charge of their lives and develop loving relationships. It can also help protect them from sexual abuse and becoming sexually abusive themselves.

If your child has sexual knowledge that seems inappropriate for his or her age, it's important to consider where your child may have been exposed to the information. If necessary, correct your child's understanding of the facts and set reasonable limits on exposure to sexual information or activities.

Here are a few considerations for common situations you may be unsure how to address.

### Sex play

Young children are naturally curious about their bodies and other people's bodies. Childhood sexual play is usually a combination of curiosity, learning and role-playing.

If you find your child undressing with a friend during play, remain calm. Don't overreact. You could ask matter-of-factly what game they're playing. Then, calmly tell them to get dressed and come into the other room for a chat. Remind them that children should keep their clothes on while playing. Acknowledge the curiosity while at the same time setting limits for these behaviors. You may want to suggest other ways for children to learn about boys' and girls' bodies, such as

reading books on the topic or talking to you or another trusted adult.

Behaviors that may be cause for concern include:

- a child forcing another child, especially a younger one, to engage in sexual activity
- a child threatening another child "not to tell"
- a child physically harming another child
- coercive sexual acts including oral genital contact or penetration
- consistent sexual themes in play or art work

If you suspect your child may have been abused, report the situation to your local child protective services agency. Contact your child's doctor as well.

#### Masturbation

As young children become aware of their bodies, many discover that touching their own genitals feels good, provides comfort or fulfills the desire to control their own bodies. Regardless of your attitudes about masturbation, your child needs to know that touching his or her genitals doesn't cause physical or emotional harm. Be sure to let your child know your family values about masturbation, however, and remind him or her that masturbation is a private behavior.

#### Sex

Most parents believe teenagers aren't mature enough for a sexual relationship. Find a quiet, private time to talk with your child and clearly communicate your values about appropriate sexual behavior -- including sexual intercourse and oral sex. Research shows that talking about sex doesn't encourage it. In fact, young people who can talk to their parents are more likely to delay sex, as well as use protection if they do choose to have sex. If your teen is already having sex, be sure he or she knows how to reduce the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

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