

UNDERSTANDING HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT:

What to Expect as Your Child Grows and Matures

SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF HEALTHY HUMAN DEVELOPMENT. Having an understanding of normal sexual development helps parents and caregivers understand and nurture children as they grow and move through different developmental stages. Children who are nurtured and understand healthy sexual development are less likely to become victims of sexual abuse.

You can nurture healthy sexual development by:

- Meeting emotions with understanding, acceptance and respect
- Fostering a positive view of the human body
- Reinforcing children's strengths and abilities
- Promoting a positive self-image and respect for others
- Responding honestly and accurately to children's questions
- Providing information about bodies and sexuality
- Promoting clear and open communication

Ages Birth to 2 years Infants and toddlers will:

- Learn about love and trust through loving relationships with parents and their caregivers
- Explore their bodies in general and touch their genitals as a form of self-soothing—touching their genitals is just as common as when they pull on their ears, suck on their fingers or touch their toes
- Notice differences between the bodies of boys and girls, children and adults
- Develop either a positive or negative body image

Ages 3 to 5 Preschoolers will:

- Learn to name body parts—teach children the actual terms for the parts of their body, especially their genitals—penis and vulva, etc.
- Become more aware of the genital area through toilet training and develop positive and/or negative attitudes toward elimination and urination depending on toilet learning (for more information, see Teaching Your Child to Use the Potty on page 19)
- Establish a firm certainty about being male or female
- Sometimes get pleasure from touching their genitals and may begin to masturbate
 - **It is important to know** that children do not have the same feelings adults have when masturbating during this age. Parents and caregivers can set limits as to when and where it is appropriate to engage in this activity. For example, "It is ok to touch your penis in your bedroom, but not in the grocery store." It is also important not to instill too many rules, because it may result in children feeling ashamed of their bodies.
- Show an interest in the differences of boys and girls while urinating
- Be curious about the physical differences between the genders and make comments or ask questions about these differences
- Enjoy nudity
- Be interested in privacy for themselves, yet be very interested in the bathroom activities of others
- Be curious and aware of their navels
- Sometimes grab their genitals when under stress or when they need to urinate



- Have fun with bathroom humor and like to use toilet language (bathroom talk) like, “You’re a yucky poo-poo.” Or “poopy-head.”
- Be curious about where they came from
 - **Teach children correct information** instead of letting them believe misinformation. How much information and how specific varies depending on the person teaching and the need to know. It is perfectly appropriate to tell children at this age that babies come from mommies and daddies. That may be just enough for them before they are interested in another topic.
- Learn what is socially appropriate, about respecting the personal boundaries of others, and about public and private behaviors
- Be interested in babies—usually more about how a baby is born than how one is conceived
- Show curiosity about pregnancy and nursing
- Likely to play house, doctor or other forms of body exploration or “sex play” with friends
 - **These games are universal** and help children understand gender differences.
 - **This can be a good opportunity** to say to your child, “I know you are wondering about each others’ bodies. Let’s talk about what you want to know.”
 - **It is also a good opportunity to say,** “Your body belongs to you. You can tell someone, ‘No’ if you don’t want to be touched.”
 - **You also need to be aware of safety issues.** Children may insert pencils, sticks or other objects in body openings and cause injury.
 - **Although it is normal** for children of the same ages to engage in this exploratory play, there is cause for concern if one of the children is older.
- May learn words related to sex and try using them.
- May imitate adult sexual roles, for example, your preschoolers may talk about having a boyfriend or girlfriend or who they are going to marry when they grow up. These conversations are normal fantasies for preschoolers.

Ages 6 to 8 It is important to be open and honest during this stage of development and to have home be the first source of sexual information given to children. You want to be a credible source of information to keep the lines of communication open between you and your child. Always remember, it is OK to say, “I don’t know, but we can find out together.” This is a better approach than making an answer up and having your child find out later it wasn’t true. Children ages 6 – 8 will:

- Need to learn to set personal boundaries
- Need to understand actual terms for body parts and be able to talk about all body parts without a sense of naughtiness
- Need to be able to ask trusted adults questions about sexuality, and know that sexuality has private aspects
- Need to be able to identify differences between sexes and learn how babies “get in” and “get out” in general terms if they are curious
- Begin to insist on increased privacy for getting dressed and using the bathroom
- Sometimes use sexual and obscene language to test adults’ reactions
- Become more sensitive to gender differences—same sex friendships tend to be more dominant and development of male/female roles becomes stronger
- May continue masturbation and sex play

Ages 9 to 12 Sexual development is very active during this age, with rapid physical, emotional and behavioral changes in children. Children begin looking more grown up, but it is important to remember they are still children. Children ages 9 – 12 are about to experience many changes to their body that may make them feel self-conscious, embarrassed or awkward. It is important to talk with your child about sexual development and assure them that these changes are normal and that they will be experiencing many changes in their bodies over the next several years. Children at this age can gain a clearer understanding of sexuality through education. By the end of this stage children should be aware of the following: the life cycle and sexual development at all ages, anatomically accurate terms to talk about body parts for both sexes, non-stereotyped gender roles, and the basic facts about personal hygiene. Children ages 9 – 12 will:

- Experience changes in voice and the penis and testicles mature (boys)
- Begin having periods and develop breasts (girls)
- Experience increased sweating requiring the use of deodorant
- Notice changes in skin complexion, including getting pimples
- Begin to grow pubic hair
- Sometimes masturbate to orgasm

- Sometimes engage in some mutual, same gender exploration and sex play, but less than earlier
- Begin to have an interest in the details of their own organs and functions and seek out pictures in books
- Feel uncomfortable undressing in front of others, even a same-sex parent
- Continue to value same-sex friendships—may share information about sexuality with friends of the same gender
- Enjoy being like their peers and dressing and speaking the same, which can make them feel less different in times of rapid change
- Sometimes experiment with peeping, sexual jokes, name calling and teasing
- Often engage in swearing and conversations with sexual content—may also use sexual terms to insult each other
- Experience increased sexual feelings and fantasies
- Develop crushes on friends, older teens, teachers, rock stars, etc.—romantic feelings may be directed toward the same sex and/or the opposite sex
- Have to face decisions about sex and drugs

Children ages 13 to 18 will:

- Complete the changes of puberty
- Menstruation occurs in almost all girls by age 16 and ovulation is established in girls 18 – 24 months after menarche, the first menstrual period or bleeding
- Value independence and rely less on parents as the sexual authority figures
- Experience increased sexual feelings and desire physical closeness with a partner
- Begin to face peer pressure to be sexually active whether or not they feel ready
- Likely masturbate and engage in sexual fantasies more often
- Favor romantic relationships over close friendships
- Be faced with choices which may lead to pregnancy or sexually-transmitted diseases—set expectations and limits about sexual behavior with your child

Additional Tips

Let your children know they can come to you with questions. Starting early with sexual development education can help you communicate with your child now and during the teen years. Some guidelines to help you keep the lines of communication open include:

- Letting your child know he or she can come to you for information
- Always being honest with your child
- Being willing to repeat information until your child understands
- Checking out what your child already knows by asking what he or she thinks
- Keeping your answers simple and thinking about what your child can and can't understand
- Realizing it's OK to say, "I don't know, but I will find out!"

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HERE'S HELP



Use the **Family Resources on pages 91–95** to learn about a variety of family support services available in your community.