

Families Are Talking

Volume 3
Number 4

What Is Normal Childhood Sexual Development?

Children are curious about the world around them. They tend to reach for and touch everything they can get their hands on, ask questions like “Why is the sky blue?,” and simply stare at their surroundings to gather information. Sexuality is no exception. When children are young, they are curious about their bodies, other people’s bodies, gender roles, and almost everything else related to sexuality. During adolescence, young people may want to know if they are “normal,” what it feels like to date, to kiss someone, and what it’s like to experiment with sexual behaviors. While many parents are nervous that they might witness their young children playing doctor or find out that their teen kissed a peer, this inquisitiveness is most often a natural part of young people’s sexual development, not a cause for concern.

How Can Parents and Caregivers Handle a Sexual Scenario?

Reacting to a sexual scenario—whether it’s dealt with directly or ignored—sends a message that can help or hinder a child’s sexual development. By viewing these as “teachable moments,” opportunities to convey positive messages and values about sexuality, parents and caregivers can lay the foundation for their children to be sexually healthy. This also lets children know that their parents are open to talking with them. It’s never too late to talk with children about sexuality. And, even if parents and caregivers handled a past situation in ways that they are not proud of, it’s not too late to begin to share positive messages.

What Behaviors Can Parents and Caregivers Expect at Various Stages?

Every child is different. While some children may not exhibit sexual behaviors, many will engage in all or some of the common behaviors below. If, however, children display sexual signs that increase in frequency, aggressiveness, and intensity over a short period of time, or engage in behaviors beyond the scope of what follows, they should be evaluated by a therapist or other expert in the field of childhood sexual development.

COMMON BEHAVIORS*

From Birth to Age 2, children may:

- Explore their body parts, including their genitals. Boys this age can have erections, and girls’ vaginas can lubricate. Believe it or not, this genital response actually begins while they are in the womb.
- Begin to develop feelings about touch, their body, male or female identity, and the way they “should” act as a boy or girl. These feelings are often influenced by the child’s interactions with family and society.

How Parents and Caregivers Can Foster the Sexual Development of Their Children from Birth to Age 2

- Allow the baby to touch his/her genitals during diaper changes.
- Instill a positive body image by sharing positive baby “body” talk.
- Model behavior and share positive messages about gender and touch when holding, dressing, talking to, and playing with the baby.

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Birth to Age 2
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COMMON BEHAVIORS*

Children Ages 3 to 4 may:

- Become increasingly curious about their bodies. Knowing that touching their genitals feels good, they may begin to masturbate by stimulating themselves with their hand or rocking against a stuffed animal, which may or may not lead to orgasm.
- Establish that they are a boy or a girl. However, while playing they may pretend to be the other gender.
- Be inquisitive about body differences and voluntarily play house, doctor, or explore other forms of sexual play with friends or siblings that are close in age and developmental level. If they play alone, they might undress their dolls to see their genitals.
- Express interest in words associated with bathroom behaviors, show curiosity about how males and females use the toilet, repeat “curse” words that they hear, and start to ask sexuality-related questions like “Where did I come from?”

COMMON BEHAVIORS*

Children Ages 5 to 8 may:

- Continue sex play and masturbation.
- Become very curious about pregnancy and birth.
- Form strong same-sex friendships. Girls tend to form close intimate bonds with one or two other girls. Boys usually play in larger groups and their play is usually oriented around activities.
- Show strong interest in stereotypical male and female roles, regardless of parents’ approach to childrearing.

How Parents and Caregivers Can Foster the Sexual Development of Their Children Ages 3 to 8:

- Explain in a calm tone that while touching the genitals can feel good, it is to be done in a private place like their bedroom.
- When finding a child engaged in sex play with another child, gently ask them what they are doing so that the scenario can be understood from the child’s perspective. It is important to remove the adult lens and see the behavior from the child’s point of view. This will help parents understand that more often than not, the behavior is not erotically focused but motivated by curiosity.
- Parents can then explain that one’s penis/vulva/buttocks etc. are considered to be private, and that no one should touch their “private parts” except for health reasons or to clean them.
- Give the child anatomically correct dolls to help them understand that girls and boys have many body parts that are the same and some that are different.
- Read age-appropriate sexuality books with the child to help lay the foundation for them to grow up sexually healthy.
- Continue to model appropriate behavior and share positive messages about gender and other aspects of sexuality that arise.
- Use proper terms to name body parts, including the genitals.
- Follow up children’s questions age-appropriately by asking questions like “What do you think?” This will give parents an idea of what they are really asking and help give an indication of what they are ready to learn.

COMMON BEHAVIORS*

Children Ages 9 to 12 may:

- Become more modest and desire privacy as they begin puberty.
- Be more curious about developed male and female bodies.
- Look at erotic magazines and Internet sites.
- Develop romantic crushes on friends, older teens, celebrities, and other people that play a role in their life like a teacher, coach, or counselor.
- Show an interest in dating.
- Wonder “Am I normal?” and compare themselves to others.
- Experience pressure to conform to family and societal expectations of appropriate behavior for boys and girls.
- Use sexual language and explore romantic and sexual fantasies.
- Masturbate to a deeper, more adult-style orgasm.

How Parents and Caregivers Can Foster the Sexual Development of Their Children Ages 9 to 12:

- Respect the pre-teen’s desire for privacy.
- Share family values about dating and love.
- Help pre-teens develop decision-making, communication, and assertiveness skills.
- Continue to model appropriate behavior and share positive messages about sexuality-related issues.
- Continue to answer pre-teen’s questions and share messages about various topics and family values.
- Give the pre-teen age-appropriate sexuality books.
- Let the pre-teen know that they have support.

COMMON BEHAVIORS

Children Ages 13 to 18 may:

- Want to date.
- Feel pressured by peers to engage in activities, including sexual behaviors that they might not be ready to experience, but go along with because they want to be perceived as “cool.”
- Continue to masturbate.
- Fantasize about romantic or sexual scenarios.
- Fall in love.
- Experiment with kissing and touching that may include oral sex and intercourse.

*Some of the common behaviors listed were taken from the book *The Subject Is Sex* by Pamela M. Wilson, M.S.W., Marcia Quackenbush, M.S., M.F.T., C.H.E.S., and William M. Kane, Ph.D., C.H.E.S.

How Parents and Caregivers Can Foster the Sexual Development of Their Children Ages 13 to 18:

- Continue to model appropriate behavior and share positive messages about sexuality-related issues.
- Continue to answer pre-teen’s/teen’s questions and share messages about various topics and family values.
- Give the pre-teen/teen age-appropriate sexuality books.
- Let the pre-teen/teen know that they have support.

Now What Do I Do?

The following step-by-step process can help parents and caregivers address sexuality-related circumstances head-on by simply seeing the scenario through the child’s eyes, thinking about what they want to teach their child, and choosing the messages they want to share. Below is an example of a scenario regarding gender roles, but this process can be used no matter how old the child is or what issues arise.

Topic: GENDER ROLES

Imagine the Scenario: You enter your five-year-old son’s room and find him changing the diaper on the baby doll belonging to his friend Mary. He asks “Will you buy me a baby doll like this?”

Step One: Ask Yourself...

Why is he doing that?

- He may have seen it advertised on television.
- He wants something his friend has.
- It’s a different and interesting kind of toy for him. None of the other boys he knows has a doll.
- He has seen adults change diapers.
- He’s having fun playing Daddy.

Step Two: Say to Yourself...

Now what do I do? What are some of the messages that I want to teach my child about gender roles?

- Girls and boys have many similarities and a few differences.
- Some people may expect or demand that boys and girls behave in certain ways, but this is beginning to change.

Tackle These Resources to Make Talking Easier

For books that help parents and caregivers talk with their children about sexuality issues, go to www.familiesaretalking.org/resources/resources_for_parents.html or call SIECUS to get a copy.

- Both women and men can be involved and caring parents.
- Boys and girls can do the same chores at home.
- Men and women are capable of doing almost all the same jobs.
- Some men and women may be told that certain jobs and tasks are only for women or only for men, but this is beginning to change.

Step Three: Ask Yourself...

What response will give the message I want to share?

POSSIBLE RESPONSES AND MESSAGES

Response: “This is a girl’s toy. Boys don’t play with dolls.”

Message: There are toys that are only for boys and toys that are only for girls.

Response: “It’s nice that you like to play Daddy.”

Message: “Play is rehearsal for adult behavior. Males can do a great job taking care of a baby.”

Response: “We’ll think about it. Why don’t you and Mary play with something else?”

Message: Playing with a doll is not OK at this time. If you don’t really intend to think about it, but would rather ignore his request, the child will likely sense that the parent doesn’t intend to follow through.

FAMILIES ARE TALKING

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La familia habla, visit www.lafamiliahabla.org

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ASK AMY

Do I need to tell the other parent that our kids were playing doctor?

Q The other day, my 4-year-old daughter's friend came home with her after school for a play-date. When I checked on them, I found them playing doctor. Do I need to tell the friend's parent?

A Yes, it's important to mention what you observed. Parents appreciate knowing what goes on with their children when they are not around—whether it's that the play-date went splendidly, that the child was given a snack after school, or that she/he fell and scraped her knee when playing outside. And, while it may not be as easy to bring up, you should also share the sexuality-related scenario and how you handled it.

If after finding out, the other parent doesn't agree with what you did and said, don't take it personally. The reality is that child-rearing styles vary. Nonetheless, most parents will be glad that you brought it to their attention, giving them the opportunity to share messages and values with their child.

How do I handle my pre-teen viewing porn on the Internet?

Q My 12-year-old son is always using the Internet. He says that he is doing homework. After checking his computer without his knowledge, it seems that he has been viewing adult websites, possibly for hours on end. How can I bring up the topic without letting him know that I "spied" on him?

A While it's possible that your son is deliberately looking at adult websites, it could also be that someone else has used his computer or that the sites appear spontaneously as pop-up ads. Whatever the case may be, the truth of the matter is that today's youth are bombarded by sexy images of scantily clad bodies on the Internet, billboards, television, and in magazines. Not to mention, if he hasn't already, within the next few years, your son will be going through puberty. Whether or not he's looking at porn sites, he's likely curious about how his body will look and may wonder what the female form looks like nude.

In the meantime, if you are concerned about his computer usage, set ground rules. Try limiting his computer time; moving the computer to a space where you can observe his viewing habits (you can explain this by telling him that everyone in your family wants easy computer access); and most importantly, give him sites where he can find credible, age-appropriate sexuality information like www.teenwire.com and www.scarleteen.com.

As a parent, you are the primary sexuality educator of your child. So, if you haven't already, think about the messages you want to share. Then, open the dialogue and keep it open, addressing various topics as teachable moments occur. For example, use a magazine like *Maxim* (which is definitely for young men, but easily accessible to young boys) to illustrate that many of the models in the magazine are airbrushed to look "perfect" rather than realistic. And, let him know that many companies use sex to sell sneakers, computers, and other popular items by positioning models in very sexy poses. Flipping through the magazine, you'll likely find a few photos to illustrate your point. As you discuss each concept, ask your son what he thinks. While it may not happen overnight, hopefully over time, a full-fledged conversation will transpire.

Amy Levine, M.A., is SIECUS' Family Project Coordinator and has worked at SIECUS for over 9 years. She is certified as a sexuality educator by the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists. Send your questions to Amy at alevine@siecus.org or mail them to her at SIECUS, Family Project, 130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350, New York, NY 10036.

Check out new Q & As at www.familiesaretalking.org/ask_amy/index.html