

An overview of healthy childhood sexual development

Understanding healthy childhood sexual development plays a key role in child sexual abuse prevention. Many adults are never taught what to expect as children develop sexually, which can make it hard to tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy behaviors.

When adults understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy behaviors, they are better able to support healthy attitudes and behaviors and react to teachable moments. Rather than interpret a child's actions with an adult perspective of sex and sexuality, adults can promote healthy development when they understand what behaviors are developmentally expected at different stages of childhood. They are also better equipped to intervene when there are concerns related to behavior or abuse.

Understanding childhood sexual development

Sexuality is much more than sex - it's our values, attitudes, feelings, interactions and behaviors. Sexuality is emotional, social, cultural, and physical. Sexual development is one part of sexuality, and it begins much earlier in life than puberty. Infants and children may not think about sexuality in same way as adults, but they learn and interpret messages related to sexuality that will shape their future actions and attitudes. For example, when a three year old removes their clothes in front of others, a parent may tell him or her that *"being naked is okay at bath time, or in your room, but not while your cousins*

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are here." The child is learning that there are times when it is OK to be naked and times when it is not.

Children are constantly learning social norms and what is expected or appropriate in interactions and relationships. There are healthy and common expressions of sexuality that children are likely to show at different developmental stages. Often adults want to know which behaviors are appropriate and indicate healthy childhood sexual development. The information below addresses common behaviors that represent healthy childhood sexual development as well as what knowledge and skills are appropriate for children at each stage (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2009; The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, 2012).

Healthy childhood sexual development		
Stage of development	Common behaviors	Encouraging healthy development
<p>Infancy (Ages 0-2)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curiosity about their body, including genitals • Touching their genitals, including masturbation, in public and in private • No inhibitions around nudity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach correct names of body parts, such as penis and vagina • Explain basic information about the differences between male and female anatomy • Help children begin to understand how to interact respectfully with peers of the same age • Provide very simple answers to questions about the body and bodily functions
<p>Early Childhood (Ages 2-5)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occasional masturbation. This usually occurs as a soothing behavior rather than for sexual pleasure. It may occur publicly or privately. • Consensual and playful exploration with children of the same age. This could include “playing house” or “playing doctor.” • May ask questions about sexuality or reproduction, such as, “Where do babies come from?” • May show curiosity in regard to adult bodies (e.g., wanting to go to into the bathroom with parents, touching women’s breasts, etc.) • Continued lack of inhibition around nudity. May take-off their diaper or clothes off • Uses slang terms for body parts and bodily functions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide basic information about reproduction (e.g., babies grow in the uterus of a woman) • Encourage a basic understanding of privacy and when things are appropriate and inappropriate • Explain the difference between wanted and unwanted touch. For example, a hug that is welcome and positive versus one that is unwelcome and uncomfortable. • Teach children about boundaries. Let children know that their body belongs to them and that they can say no to unwanted touch.

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Middle childhood (Ages 5-8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continued use of slang words, “potty humor” or jokes to describe body parts and functions• Deeper understanding of gender roles. May act in a more “gendered” manner as expected behaviors and norms associated with gender are learned (e.g., girls may want to wear dresses).• Sex play or activities that explore sexuality and bodies may occur with same- and opposite-sex friends• Masturbation. Some children may touch their genitals for the purpose of pleasure. This happens more often privately rather than in public.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote a solid understanding of gender and how children experience their gender identity. Children who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming will experience this also, but can face confusion and may need increased support from adults.• Explain the basics of human reproduction, including the role of vaginal intercourse.• Talk about the physical changes that will occur during puberty.• Explain that there are different sexual orientations such as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual.• Teach that masturbation is something that occurs in private.• Educate on personal rights (e.g., “your body belongs to you”) and responsibilities (e.g., treat boys and girls equally) related to sexuality.



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Late childhood (Ages 9-12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As puberty begins an increased need for privacy and independence is often expressed. • Interest in relationships. May want to have a girlfriend or boyfriend. • May express curiosity about adult bodies. This could involve the child trying to see people naked or undressing or involve looking for media (such as TV, movies, websites, and magazines) with sexual content. • As social norms around masturbation become clearer. Masturbation will likely occur in private. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide ongoing information about the physical aspects of puberty and changes in their body. • Educate children on the social and emotional aspects of puberty. Help to normalize the new emotions and needs that they may be experiencing. • Provide age-appropriate sexuality information and basic information about sexual behaviors and sexually transmitted infections, etc. • Encourage critical thinking and build the skills to differentiate fact from fiction in media images and representations of sexuality. • Support them in understanding they have both rights and responsibilities in their friendships and relationships. Encourage characteristics of healthy friendships and relationships.

Adolescence and ongoing development

As children progress into adolescence, signs of development become more pronounced and the need for accurate information about sexuality and sex continues. In addition to more detailed questions about sexuality and sexual health, young adults are often in need of support in finding accurate sources of information and resources. Additionally, adults can support youth as they navigate cultural and social messages about sexuality and gender shared though media and often reinforced by peers.



Healthy childhood sexual development and child sexual abuse prevention

Discussing sexual development within the context of child sexual abuse prevention can cause discomfort and raise tough questions. Conversations about children and sexuality are often seen as taboo. Thus, education, including accurate information about childhood sexual development, is rare. This leaves the media and pop culture, which often hyper-sexualize or exploit children, as the primary information source for both adults and children.

It is important to recognize that many adults had little or no sexuality education growing up, and may have been given negative messages as children about their own sexual development. This can cause adults to see behaviors that are typical and developmentally expected of childhood sexual development as a problem. Discomfort can also occur for adults if they interpret a child's behaviors through an adult perspective. For example, a four-year-old who wants to shower with a parent may simply be curious about different bodies, while a parent may interpret this curiosity as overly sexual.

Childhood sexual development is a challenging topic. With more knowledge, comfort and skills, adults can better understand and support healthy development and recognize signs of unhealthy or abusive behaviors in both youth and adults. For parents, community members and persons working in sexual violence prevention, assessing one's comfort level is a great first step in determining what information and skill are necessary for a stronger understanding of healthy childhood sexual development. All adults in the community can be powerful allies and advocates in preventing child sexual abuse.

When is behavior a concern?

Remember that behavior falling within healthy childhood sexual development should exhibit the following characteristics (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2009):

- Children are being playful and/or curious, not aggressive or angry.
- Play involving sexuality (i.e. playing Doctor, "Show me yours/I'll show you mine") should be with a child of a similar age and developmental level, not with a much older or younger child.
- When adults ask children to stop or set limits around inappropriate behaviors they listen.
- The behavior does not cause physical or emotional harm to the child or others.



Parents & caregivers can:

Develop positive and open communication around topics of sexuality. Create a dynamic where your children know they can come to you for accurate information and guidance that reflects your values without shaming.

Model respectful boundaries when it comes to touch and affection. Don't coerce children to give hugs or other displays of affection when they don't want to. Teach them that they have a right to have boundaries around their personal space and body from a young age and that they have a responsibility to respect the boundaries of others. Empower children to seek help when something feels uncomfortable to them.

All adults & community members can:

Challenge unhealthy norms. When you see or hear an unhealthy norm in either children or adults, in action, say something. Explain what is concerning about the norm and share a healthy alternative. Emphasizing safety, equality and respect as the standard is key to ending oppression and violence.

Be an engaged bystander. If you perceive it to be safe and you see something that is of concern, trust your instincts, and do or say something about it. Everyone has a responsibility to protect children from sexual violence. Active bystanders make an impact, and it's critical to speak up so institutions, policies, and laws can be changed to prevent harm.

Advocates, educators & professionals can:

Engage adults in addressing the issue. Help adults in the community better understand their roles in preventing child sexual abuse. Create opportunities in outreach and programming for dialogue and skill-building on this issue.



Act as resource. Parents and other community members need support and information on topics of childhood sexual development and child sexual abuse prevention. Provide connections to books, curricula and other resources that may help expand knowledge and comfort.

References

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2009). *Sexual development and behavior in children: Information for parents and caregivers*. Retrieved from the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services: <http://hss.state.ak.us/ocs/Publications/pdf/sexualdevelop-children.pdf>

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada. *Sexuality and childhood development* (n.d.). Retrieved 8/19/2012 from <http://www.sexualityandu.ca/parents/sexuality-child-development>