

Normal Sexual Development

Infancy (0-2 years old)

- ✓ Learn through relationship with caregivers
- ✓ Focus on developing a sense of trust
- ✓ Learn about body through sense of touch
- ✓ May be able to make basic distinction between males and females
- ✓ May explore genitals
- ✓ May have spontaneous reactions that appear sexual (e.g., erection, lubrication), but are not
- ✓ No inhibitions about nudity

Adults can facilitate healthy sexual development by

- Using correct terms for body parts
- Modeling “comfortable” touch (e.g., hugs that are not forced upon the child)
- Talking to child about boundaries as the opportunity arises (e.g., during diapering, bath tell child that genitals are off limits)

Toddler and Preschool Years (2-5 years old)

- ✓ Develop language to describe genitalia
- ✓ Should clearly know difference between males and females
- ✓ May know basics of human reproduction (e.g., babies grow inside mother’s tummy)
- ✓ Often masturbate
- ✓ Often engage in consensual genital exploration with same age peers
- ✓ May show curiosity about adult genitalia (e.g., may try to see Mommy nude)
- ✓ No inhibitions about nudity

Adults can facilitate healthy sexual development by

- Encouraging child to use correct terminology to describe genitalia
- Teaching child the difference between comfortable/appropriate touch and uncomfortable/unacceptable touch
- Modeling comfortable touch by not forcing child to have physical contact (e.g., no forced hugs or kisses, no wrestling if child protests)
- Modeling the importance of privacy during bathing and toileting
- Giving child permission to be private about his/her own nudity
- Using everyday opportunities to teach child fundamentals of sexuality (e.g., if child asks questions about sex, give simple and direct answers)
- Teaching child that touching oneself feels good, is OK, and can be done in private
- Teaching child to respect other people’s boundaries and privacy

Middle Childhood (5-8 years old)

- ✓ Gender identity solidifies and stabilizes (understand physical, behavioral, and emotional distinctions between males and females,
- ✓ Should have basic understanding of puberty (some children, especially girls, will show early signs of puberty)
- ✓ Should have basic understanding of human reproduction
- ✓ May understand differences in sexual orientation
- ✓ May masturbate
- ✓ Will develop more stable friendships
- ✓ May engage in consensual genital exploration with same age (and often, same sex) peers
- ✓ Will begin to be modest about nudity

Adults can facilitate healthy sexual development by

- Respecting child's need for privacy
- Being clear with child about respect for people's boundaries and need for privacy
- Talking with child about bodily responses, especially those that are precursors to sexual response (e.g., "it feels good to touch one's genitals), and about what is and is not appropriate during peer interaction
- Modeling healthy, intimate adult relationships characterized by effective communication
- Teaching child about male and female puberty (by 7-8 years old)
- Using everyday opportunities to teach child about sexuality, even the mechanics of reproduction (children should know the "birds and the bees" by no later than 9 years old—It's important to know that research shows that children whose parents talk with them about sexuality are less likely to become sexually active at an early age)

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