

Healthy Sexual Development and Stages of Sexual Play

Developing Body & Sexual Literacy

As parents, it is important to communicate with and teach our children as they grow. Many parents find it difficult to talk to their children about their bodies and sexual activity. Learning ways to increase communications with children about their sexual development and play is worth the effort! Research indicates that parents who teach their children about behavioral expectations and consequences, family values, body safety, and sexuality lower many risks and impart important protective factors to their children, such as:

- *Increased sexual conservatism*¹
- *Later age of onset of sexual activity*²
- *Lower risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases*³
- *Lower risk of sexual assault and domestic violence*⁴



Children need to learn about sexuality. If they don't receive information from their parents, they will seek it from their peers, TV, magazines, movies and other media, which may convey misinformation and cause confusion. Schools cannot impart a family's values along with the sex education curriculum. Parents are uniquely positioned

to help their children develop body and sexual and safety literacy, and to learn to recognize the characteristics of healthy interpersonal relationships, within the context of the family's beliefs and traditions. Natural and healthy sexual exploration is an information gathering process. At a very young age, children begin to explore their bodies by touching, poking, pulling, and rubbing all their body parts, including their genitals. The more information parents have about childhood sexuality, the more likely they are to respond to their child's sexual development in positive, nurturing ways.⁵

Commitment to Prevention and Support

The staff of Isabella County Child Advocacy Center (ICCAC) prepared this publication to provide parents answers to some common questions about child sexual development and common sexual play behaviors at various stages of human development. It also provides examples of potentially unhealthy sexual play behaviors, as well as resources for additional information. It is the goal of ICCAC to partner with parents in their efforts to protect children from sexual violence and to promote healthy, satisfying relationships for all.

Frequently Asked Questions...⁶

What behaviors should I expect as my child develops sexually?

Many parents become embarrassed, upset, and worried when children touch their genitals or exhibit sexual play behaviors. It is natural and normal for children to touch themselves to explore their anatomy and sensations. Just as infants put their hands and other objects into their mouths to learn about and explore the physical characteristics of and sensations produced by these objects, children may rub their genitals with their hand or against objects, such as furniture, toys and pillows. When young children explore their genitals, it should not be considered sexual behavior. Children experience sensations that "feel good," but don't perceive these activities as "doing something sexual." Children may touch and rub themselves to relieve tension,

to relax, and to self-soothe. This is normal behavior from infancy throughout child development. Such behavior can signal parents their children are curious, and provide "teachable moments"—naturally-arising opportunities when children are especially disposed to receive new knowledge—for imparting guidance and answering questions.

Children are curious not only about their own bodies, but also those of their same-age peers. It is common for children to examine and touch other children to explore the similarities and differences between their body parts and others'. This occurs with both same-gender and opposite-gender peers. As children grow, their play and language reflect their experiences. They play house and role play with dolls, pets, and stuffed animals—these play activities also include sexual activities they've observed. They use toys to model kissing, holding hands, and sleeping together. When exposed to sexual activities, such as adults showing affection, dancing provocatively, and/or having intercourse, children will role play these activities during their play. School-age children like to tell jokes and to use "impact" words with their peers; this language often includes sexual words and jokes they've heard from adults. Play is a child's work; imitation is an important way children process new knowledge and experiences. These are normal healthy activities, and parents can expect to observe these types of behaviors and language, without undue concern that children have been exposed to inappropriate content or that they are "acting out sexually." Children imitate what they have heard and observed, but often do not understand the meaning behind these words and play.

What should I teach my children about their bodies and personal safety?



Teaching children about their bodies is not the same thing as teaching them about "sex." Providing information and guidance about their bodies is like teaching children other skills and rules, such as how to sit at the dinner table, or to ride in a car. Parents can begin to teach children about their bodies starting in infancy. The following guidelines build a foundation of trust and open communication between children and parents, and become "protective factors" for abuse prevention.

Fundamentals:

- Teach children the proper names for all their body parts, including: penis, testicles, vagina, buttocks, breasts, nipples, and genitals.
- Teach children about respect for their own and others' bodies in everyday situations:
 - ✓ Handle children's bodies gently; discipline without physical harm.
 - ✓ Teach children to handle others' bodies gently. Do not allow children to hit or hurt you, other people, or animals.
 - ✓ Do not force children to kiss, hug, or sit on the laps of other people—even close relatives—if they feel uncomfortable doing so. Respect their right to tell "grandpa or grandma" they don't want to give them a kiss or hug.
 - ✓ Teach children that some rules keep our bodies safe and *everyone* must follow them; e.g., must wear a seat belt in a vehicle; must look both ways when crossing the street.
- As children grow and are able, teach them to bathe, toilet and dress themselves starting at an early age.
- Teach children that privacy, modesty, and boundaries are important—we must respect others' and they must respect ours. Explain that it is not okay to invade other people's privacy (such as opening a closed bathroom or bedroom door without knocking and gaining permission), or to violate others' boundaries (such as taking others' toys without their permission).

¹ Huebner & Howell, 2003

² Dilorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999; Hutchinson, Jemmott, Jemmott, Braverman, & Fong, 2003; Kovar, 2009; Gordon, Futris, Barton, Arnold, & Walker-O'Neal, 2010; Hutchinson & Cederbaum, 2010

³ DiClemente, Wingood, Crosby, Cobb, Harrington, & Davies, 2001

⁴ Asdigian & Finkelhor, 1995; Finkelhor, Asdigian, & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995; Burgess & Wurtele, 1998; O'Keefe, 2005; Leclerc, Wortley, & Smallbone, 2011

⁵ Adapted from: *Children's sexual behavior and body safety: A guide for parents*. Grand Rapids, MI: The Children's Assessment Center, (n.d.)

⁶ Ibid.

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- Encourage children to trust you—even with their perceived “personal failings”; resist punishing or shaming children for toileting accidents, food spills, and/or choices they regret; use these circumstances as opportunities for guidance and growth.
- Teach children they can tell you when they are feeling uncomfortable, sad, angry, confused or scared.
- Explain that no adult should ever ask children to keep secrets from their parents. If an adult tells them something and asks them not to tell their parents, this is a “secret” they *should* tell a parent as soon as possible.
 - ✓ As children grow older, teach school-age children that if a friend tells them a secret about something that is or might hurt that friend or other children, this is a secret they should tell a parent or other trusted adult like a teacher—no one should ask them to keep self-harm plans or plans to harm others a secret.
- Listen to children when they have something to tell you. Take seriously what children have to say about the way people treat them. When your child says they don’t like someone, take the time to figure out why.
 - ✓ If children are being bullied and ask for help, support your child and work to resolve the conflict.
 - ✓ Monitor adults and older children when they are around your children. Get to know the people with whom your children spend time. Do not leave a child with adults, relatives, friends, neighbors, or other care providers you do not know, do not trust, or who have abused children in the past. When teens babysit other children, make sure they can reach you, and have a signal they can use to let you know they feel unsafe or need your help.



- ✓ Explain that it’s parents’ (and other adults’) job to protect children and to work to keep them safe. Explain that it is the children’s job to tell their parents if anyone invades their body boundaries or makes them feel unsafe or scared. Reassure them you will listen, believe, and protect them.
- ✓ Teach children they should tell a parent or another trusted adult, like a grandparent or a teacher, if anyone touches them in ways that make them feel confused or frightened.
- ✓ Role-play situations like these in a playful way, so children can imitate appropriate behavior, practice it, and become comfortable saying “no” to unwanted touch.
- ✓ Reinforce that children must respect other people’s bodies, too, and should not touch other children without permission, or in ways those children do not like. Explain that if someone asks them to stop, then they must stop that touching behavior—we cannot touch others in ways that make them uncomfortable.
- ✓ Explain that children may not touch other people’s private parts. If other people ask them to do so, they should tell them “no.” Then they should tell their parents or another trusted adult about this.

How should I respond to sexual behaviors and play?

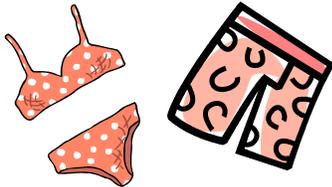
- **Try not to overreact; whenever possible, teach, don’t preach.** By remaining calm and “matter-of-fact” in our responses to our children’s behavior, children develop a positive sense of self and sexuality.
- **Intervene and redirect undesirable or inappropriate behavior.** If children rub their genitals in public, explain to them that touching their “private parts” is something they should do in private, not in public places. Children should not be told this activity is “bad, dirty, or nasty,” and they should not be punished. It might be helpful to discourage public masturbation activities using an approach similar to one used to discourage children from picking their noses or belching loudly in public—if they feel the need to pick their noses or belch loudly, the privacy of their own bedrooms or the bathroom are better choices for these activities. Choose an approach that fits with your family values.

If parents observe their children engaged in undesirable or inappropriate sexual play with other children, they should explain that when playing with friends, they need to keep their clothes on. Also, parents should explain that children should not show or touch one another’s private parts. Parents should follow-up by asking the children if they have any questions, and offer answers to any they ask.

- **Reinforce acceptable and appropriate behaviors; resist punishing, shaming, or blaming.** Punishing sexual behaviors can lead to sexual inhibitions and hinder normal child development. Clearly communicate expectations to children, without demeaning or shaming them.

Body Safety messages: Teach children (and reinforce throughout childhood) the following important messages regarding their bodies and touching:

- The areas covered by our swimming suits are called our “private parts.”
- Touching our own private parts is something best done in a private place, away from others, such as in the bedroom or bathroom.
- Explain that we all have private parts, and our bodies belong only to us—we each get to say who, when, and how others may touch our bodies.
 - ✓ Let your child know he or she should tell you right away if anyone tries to look at or touch their private parts.
 - ✓ Reassure them that most touches are okay touches, but if touches make them feel uncomfortable, confused, or scared, children can tell the person “no” or to “stop it,” or that they “don’t like that touch”...



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Additional Resources for Parents:

Other sources of information abound and may be accessed electronically through the Internet. Good sources of factual information regarding childhood development, prevention of child sexual violence, and risk and protective factors for children and teens may be found at sites such as Center for Disease Control (CDC), National Child Alliance, and WebMD, to name a few. Other topics of interest and possible relevance to child development and family relationships include topics such as the impact of substance misuse and dependence, gambling, bullying, and pornography on family life; ways to communicate family culture, beliefs, spirituality and traditions to children and adolescents; preventing teen dating violence, and others.

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