



# What is Normal Childhood Sexual Development?

The following is meant as a guide to understand what is typical sexual development for children of different ages. Every child is different. While some children may not exhibit sexual behaviors, many will engage in all or some of the behaviors listed below.

## **Birth to age 2:**

- Explore body parts and genitals
- Boys can have erections, girls can have lubricated vaginas
- Genital response occurs as early as womb
- Beginning to develop feelings about touch and their body
- Begin to develop the way they "should" act as boy and girl

### Parents Can:

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

## **Ages 3 to 4:**

- Become increasingly curious about body
- Touch genitals because it feels good
- May masturbate by touching themselves or rocking with a stuffed animal
- Establish that they are boy or girl, however - while playing they may decide to be the other gender
- Be inquisitive about body differences, may play house, doctor, explore other forms of sexual play with friends or siblings of similar age
- Interested in words associated with bathroom behavior, show curiosity about how males and females use the toilet
- Start to ask sexual questions like "Where did I come from or where do babies come from?"

### Parents Can:

- Explain that one's penis/vulva/buttocks etc. are considered "private parts" and that no one other than themselves should touch them except for health reasons or to clean them
- Use proper terms to name body parts, including the genitals
- If your values are that masturbation is acceptable, explain in a calm tone that while touching the genitals can feel good, it is to be done in a private place like their room

## **Ages 5 to 8:**

- Become curious about pregnancy and birth
- Form strong same sex friendships
- Girls may have one or two best friends, boys may have a larger group of friends
- Strong interest in stereotypical male and female roles regardless to parents approach to child rearing

### Parents Can:

- When finding a child engaged in playing doctor or other forms of sexual play with another child, gently ask the child what they are doing so that the scenario can be understood from the child's perspective. This will help parents understand that more often than not, the behavior is not erotically focused but motivated by curiosity.
- Read age-appropriate books with the child to help lay the foundation for sexual health
- Continue to model appropriate behavior and share positive messages about gender and other aspects of sexuality

- 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.

### **Ages 9 to 12:**

- Have an emerging sense of self as a young adult
- Become more modest
- Become more curious about developed male and female bodies
- Show an interest in dating
- Wonder "Am I normal?" and compare themselves to others
- Feel anxious about puberty, when it will happen, how it will occur, how to be prepared, etc.
- Feel shy about asking questions of caregivers, especially regarding sexuality, and may act like they already know all the answers
- Value privacy highly
- Feel pressure to conform to family and societal expectations of appropriate behavior for boys and girls

#### Parents Can:

- 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
- Continue to answer questions and share messages about your values
- Let the pre-teen know they have your support
- Inform children about puberty and the changes that will take place

### **Ages 13 to 18:**

- Want to date
- Feel pressured by peers to engage in activities, including sexual behaviors that they may not be ready to experience, but go along with because they want to be perceived as "cool"
- Understand that they are sexual and understand the options and consequences of sexual expression
- Choose to express their sexuality in ways that may or may not include sexual intercourse
- Recognize the components of healthy and unhealthy relationships
- Have a clear understanding of pregnancy and of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections and the possible consequences of sexual intercourse and have the ability to make reasoned choices about sex based on knowledge
- Recognize the role media play in propagating views about sex
- Have the capacity to learn about intimate, loving, long-term relationships
- Have an understanding of their own sexual orientation

#### Parents Can:

- Continue to model appropriate behavior and give positive messages
- Continue to answer questions and share your values
- Let the teen know that they have your support
- Assure their child knows the biological components of the reproductive cycle.
- Teach their child about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections
- Understand contraceptive alternatives and where to get them
- Recognize the media's impact on encouraging sexual involvement

This list was adapted from Advocates for Youth publications [www.advocatesforyouth.org](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org) and Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) [www.familiesaretalking.org](http://www.familiesaretalking.org)

For more information on how to Talk to your Kids about Sexuality contact  
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