

Sexual Behaviors

One of the most concerning moments in parenting can be when your child has engaged in sexual behavior. In this situation, parents may find themselves wondering if this is a normal part of growing up or an indication of sexual abuse. In either case, it is important to help children develop healthy, age-appropriate sexuality within the values of the family.

Normal sexual development in children:

Anatomy, gender and the function of the human body is the foundation of identity. Sexual curiosity, interest, experimentation and behavior are progressive over time and connected to other aspects of child development. In infancy, the unique physical intimacy and emotional attachment between parent and infant can be the early foundation of more mature forms of physical intimacy and love that develop later as part of adult sexuality. It is normal for infants to engage in accidental exploration of their own bodies.



Children begin to distinguish body parts by age two or three and identity as a boy or girl starts to develop. Preschoolers like to show off their bodies and look at the bodies of others for fun. Bathroom activities and language become a prime interest for the preschooler. The level of sexuality in childhood games like playing doctor or house can indicate the level of exposure to adult sexuality a child has experienced. This is also the age of endless questions!

In grade school, children become interested in how babies are born. Socially, boys play with boys and girls with girls. Peers and the media begin to have a bigger influence on sexual attitudes and as a result, children may pick up sexual language and slang from TV, movies and their friends that is not used in the family home. Inappropriate or “dirty” jokes about sex, body parts and sexual orientation send kids into giggling fits. Children of this age are often disgusted by and drawn to sexual behavior and information. They also seek increased privacy.

With pre-adolescence comes puberty as well as physical and hormonal changes. Children ask questions that are more advanced. They may engage in touching themselves or in same-gender sexual behavior. Experimenting with varying degrees of nudity is common.

Adolescents become increasingly interested in romantic and sexual relationships and in mature sex behaviors. They move from group dating to one-on-one relationships. Strong emotional attachments to romantic partners develop as well as desires to express feelings within sexual relationships.

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Sexual Behaviors, ctd.

The things to remember about normal sexual development are that children become interested in, ask about and obtain sexual information in steps over time. Sexual development follows the pattern of physical and emotional development. It is mutual, spontaneous and fun. Parental guidance is the most critical factor in healthy sexual development and in learning family values related to sexuality.

When should I worry?

Signs that sexual behavior may be the result of sexual abuse versus normal development include excessive masturbation, having sex with many partners, forcing sexual behavior on other children, sexualized behavior beyond what is expected for the age, and a need for secrecy (different from a need for privacy). Also, consider if there is a large difference in age, size, or status between the children or if the type of sexual activity is not developmentally appropriate.

If inappropriate sexual contact occurs, try not to under or over-react. Make every effort possible to maintain a focus of safety. Intervene at the developmental stage versus the chronological age and let your child know what is and is not acceptable in your home. Therapy can be helpful to children and families where sexual abuse or inappropriate sexual contact has occurred.

Your child's best source of information regarding sex and sexuality is YOU. While it can be uncomfortable talking about sex with your child, only in this way can you be sure they have the information you want them to have and the values you want to share.



Noelle Martin, LSCSW is a Licensed Specialist Clinical Social Worker. Noelle has a Masters degree in Social Work from the University of Kansas and Bachelors degree in Psychology from Kansas State University. She provides direct clinical services to individuals, families and groups. She specializes in working with teens with behavior problems including problem sexual behaviors and group therapy for victims of sexual abuse.

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