



Nurturing Healthy Sexual Development in Kids

Understanding Sexual Development in Children and Adolescents

Sexual development is a normal part of childhood that begins at birth. Sexuality is an umbrella term that encompasses our values, attitudes, feelings, interactions, and behaviors. Sexuality may change across the lifespan, but everyone has a sexuality, including children.

Sexuality includes:

- Anatomy & Physiology - our body parts
- Gender Identity - our internal sense of gender
- Gender Expression - how we express our identity externally
- Feelings - warmth and closeness, as well as attraction during adolescence and adulthood.
- Sexual Expression - how we express sexuality

Sexual development is an important and normal part of child development, and providing children with accurate, developmentally appropriate, and non-shaming information is integral to nurturing their healthy sexual development.



Healthy Sexual Development & Exploration

Exploration is part of sexual development. In general, children involved in healthy sexual exploration are of similar age, size, and developmental stage.

Healthy sexual exploration is:

- Voluntary and consensual
- More exploratory than overtly sexual in nature
- Not hostile, aggressive, or harmful to self or others
- Among kids who know each other well and play together regularly
- Unplanned, spontaneous, and infrequent
- Easily diverted by caregivers
- Balanced by children's curiosity about many aspects of life

However, some sexual behaviors indicate more than harmless curiosity, and they are considered concerning sexual behavior. It's important to address these types of behaviors as they pose a risk to the safety and well-being of all children involved.

Concerning sexual behaviors include:

- Preoccupation with sexual play and an inability to redirect it
- Any sexual behaviors involving children who are four or more years apart

- Knowledge of sex beyond their age (adult-type activities)
 - Sexual play that causes physical or emotional discomfort or harm to the child or others
 - Sexual behaviors associated with physically aggressive behavior, coercion, or anger
 - Sexual play with animals
 - Sexual play with others with the intent to hurt
- If you notice these types of concerning behaviors, discuss the behavior with your child and assess where it may be coming from.*

Studies have shown that young children displaying problematic sexual behavior may have been sexually abused; however, this can also be a result of experiencing physical or emotional maltreatment, exposure to family violence, exposure to sexuality and sexual behavior in media, and other causes.¹⁻⁴

- ✔ If you notice these types of concerning behaviors, discuss the behavior with your child and where it may be coming from. You may also want to seek out additional resources and professionals as needed. Effective interventions exist, and research findings indicate that the approach should be tailored to each child to optimize efficacy.⁵

SUPPORTING LGBTQ+ YOUTH

Gender identity develops separately from sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is related to whom someone is attracted to physically, emotionally, and romantically, while gender identity is a person's internal sense of being male, female, neither, or somewhere on the spectrum between male and female. Most children will go through periods of exploring their gender using their clothing, hair, and toys they play with, and by role-playing. If they continue as they get older, it is likely not a phase. Don't rush to label your child; over time, your child will continue to tell you how they feel and what feels right to them. Talk to your child and ask questions without judgment.

Supporting a child who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ+) looks like:

- Talking to your child about social transitioning and determining the safety of coming out.
- Allowing your child to express gender in public and/or at family events.
- Understanding that experiencing discrimination isn't your child's fault. Work with your child's school and discuss how to prevent bias and bullying before it happens.
- Not shaming or punishing your child for their gender expression or attraction. Speak positively about your child and keep communication open.
- Not assuming your child is heterosexual.
- Finding a knowledgeable healthcare provider with a specialty in treating LGBTQ+ patients.

Talking about Sex and Sexuality with Kids

Research shows that kids and teens who have regular conversations with parents and caregivers about sex and relationships are less likely to take risks with their sexual health.⁶ Here are some suggestions for handling these topics well:

- Start early and be consistent in your language and messages. It's never too early and it's never too late!
- Have many little talks over time. This helps kids process the information and communicates that talking about sex, bodies, and sexuality is normal and expected.
- Use anatomically correct names for body parts.
- Sexual health isn't just about science. Talk about values like safety, autonomy, and respect, too.
- Model healthy behaviors and attitudes yourself.
- Check your own feelings about kids' bodies and behaviors. Don't threaten, shame, or make a child feel guilty for their body, questions, or feelings.
- Look out for teachable moments in your life, such as when helping a child bathe, taking them to the doctor, observing people in the world, or watching TV.
- When children in your life have questions about sex, bodies, or sexuality:
 - Be honest and accurate. It's okay if you need to do some research yourself!
 - Start with an open-ended question like "What do you know about how pregnancy happens?"
 - Fill in gaps in knowledge and correct misinformation.
 - Be developmentally appropriate.
 - Congratulate yourself for being an adult that a kid feels comfortable coming to with these kinds of questions!

Resources

A few books you might explore:

- My Body Belongs to Me! by Larissa Rhone (ages 3-7)
- Bodies are Cool by Tyler Feder (ages 3-7)
- When Aidan Became A Brother by Kyle Lukoff (ages 3-7)
- Julian Is a Mermaid by Jessica Love (ages 3-7)
- The Every Body Book: The LGBTQ+ Inclusive Guide zfor Kids About Sex, Gender, Bodies, and Families by Rachel E. Simon (ages 8-12)
- Tell Me About Sex, Grandma by Anastasia Higginbotham (ages 8-12)
- Let's Talk About It: A Graphic Novel by Erika Moen (ages 16-18)

Resources for helping kids with problematic sexual behaviors:

- Association for the Prevention and Treatment of Sexual Abuse www.atsa.com
- MASOC www.masoc.net
- NAFI CT www.nafict.org
- Wheeler Clinic www.wheelerclinic.org
- Greater Hartford Family Advocacy Center at Trinity Health of New England www.trinityhealthofne.org/location/the-greater-hartford-family-advocacy-center



For a full list of references, please visit endsexualviolencect.org/healthykids