

HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

(0-2 YEARS OLD)

Healthy Behaviors

- 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, such as an erection
- No inhibitions about nudity

Tips for Facilitating Healthy Sexual Development

- 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 belong only to them and are off limits to others except as need for health and hygiene)

TODDLER AND PRESCHOOL YEARS (2-5 YEARS OLD)

Healthy Behavior

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)
May touch themselves or appear to be masturbating; usually used as self-soothing technique
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
Examples of Sexual Behaviors in Children 2 to 6 Years of Age

Potentially Unhealthy Behavior

- Speaking in detail of adult-like sexual acts
- Use of explicit sexual language
- Adult-like sexual contact with adults or other children especially those involving oral to genital contact, anal or vaginal penetration

Tips for Facilitating Healthy Sexual Development

- Encouraging child to use correct terminology to describe their body
- Teaching child the difference between comfortable and uncomfortable touch
- Modeling appropriate touch and uncomfortable/unacceptable touch; avoid “good touch/bad touch” as an example as children at this age can associate touching of the genitals as something that feels good
- 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 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)

Healthy Behavior

- 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 in private
- 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

Potentially Unhealthy Behavior

- Adult-like sexual interactions
- Overtly sexual and/or specific language or discussion about mature sexual acts
- Public masturbation

Tips for Facilitating Healthy Sexual Development

- 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 body), 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)