

HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

As kids grow, they start to discover their body parts and what feels good. Here are some tips on healthy sexual behaviors and how to facilitate healthy sexual development conversations.

0 - 2 YEARS OLD

HEALTHY BEHAVIORS:

- Learn through relationships with caregivers
- Focus on developing a sense of trust
- Learn about body through sense of touch
- May be able to make basic distinction between genders
- May explore genitals
- May have spontaneous reactions that appear sexual, such as an erection
- No inhibitions about nudity

2 - 5 YEARS OLD

HEALTHY BEHAVIORS:

- Develops language to describe private parts
- Knows the difference between genders
- May know basics of human reproduction (e.g., babies grow inside mom's tummy)
- May touch themselves or appear to be masturbating; usually used as self-soothing technique
- May engage in consensual genital exploration with same age peers
- May show curiosity about adult genitalia (e.g., may try to see parents nude)
- No inhibitions about nudity

TIPS FOR FACILITATING HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT:

- Use correct terms for body parts
- Model “comfortable” touch (e.g., hugs that are not forced)
- Talk to child about boundaries as the opportunities arise (e.g., during diapering & bath time, tell the child that genitals belong only to them and are off limits to others except as need for health and hygiene)

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 or genital contact, anal, or vaginal penetration

TIPS FOR FACILITATING HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT:

- Encourage child to use correct terminology to describe body parts
- Teach kids about the difference between comfortable/appropriate touch and uncomfortable/unacceptable touch; avoid “good touch/bad touch” as kids at this age can associate the touching of genitals as something that feels good
- Model comfortable touch by not forcing hugs or kisses
- Let them know they can be private about their own nudity (cont.)

TIPS FOR FACILITATING HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT (CONTINUED):

- Model the importance of privacy during bathing and toileting
- Use everyday opportunities to teach fundamentals of sexuality and see if they have any questions about sex, give simple & direct answers
- Teach the child that touching oneself is OK and can be done in private
- Talk about boundaries and how to respect other people's privacy

5 - 8 YEARS OLD

HEALTHY BEHAVIORS:

- Gender identity solidifies and stabilizes (understand physical, behavioral, and emotional distinctions between genders)
- Should have basic understanding of puberty (some kids, 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

UNHEALTHY BEHAVIOR:

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

TIPS FOR FACILITATING HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT:

- Respect child's need for privacy
- Be clear about respect for people's boundaries & need for privacy
- Talk about bodily responses and what is appropriate
- Model healthy, intimate adult relationships characterized by effective communication
- Teach kids about puberty in all genders (by 7-8 years old)
- Use everyday opportunities to teach kids about sexuality, even the mechanics of reproduction
- Teach kids about sex by age 8; around that time other kids will start to talk about sex and you want to be the go to person for any questions