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Sexual Development and Behavior in Children



Information for Parents and Caregivers

Your five-year-old daughter is playing in her room with a couple of friends. You hear a lot of giggling and squealing.

> *When you open the door to check on the kids, you find them sitting on the floor with their panties off, pointing at and touching each other's genitals.*

What do you do?

Every day, parents around the world are faced with situations like this. Being caught off-guard by young children's self-exploration and curiosity about body parts and sexual issues is one of the uncomfortable realities of parenting, and can raise a host of troubling questions, such as, "Is my child normal?" "Should I be worried?" "What should I say?"

Although talking with children about bodily changes and sexual matters may feel awkward, providing children with accurate, age-appropriate information is one of the most important things parents can do to make sure children grow up safe, healthy, and secure in their bodies.

Sexual Development and Behavior in Young Children: The Basics

Like all forms of human development, sexual development begins at birth. Sexual development includes not only the physical changes that occur as children grow, but also the sexual knowledge and beliefs they come to learn and the behaviors they show. Any given child's sexual knowledge and behavior is strongly influenced by:

- The child's age[1-3]
- What the child observes (including the sexual behaviors of family and friends)[4]
- What the child is taught (including cultural and religious beliefs concerning sexuality and physical boundaries)

"Young people do not wake up on their thirteenth birthday, somehow transformed into a sexual being overnight. Even young children are sexual in some form."[5]

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Very young and preschool-aged children (four or younger) are naturally immodest, and may display open—and occasionally startling–curiosity about other people's bodies and bodily functions, such as touching women's breasts, or wanting to watch when grownups go to the bathroom. Wanting to be naked (even if others are not) and showing or touching private parts while in public are also

common in young children. They are curious about their own bodies and may quickly discover that touching certain body parts feels nice. (For more on what children typically do at this and other ages, see Table 1.)

As children age and interact more with other children (approximately ages 4–6), they become more aware of the differences between boys and girls, and more social in their exploration. In addition to exploring their own bodies through touching or rubbing their private parts (masturbation), they may begin "playing doctor" and copying adult behaviors such as kissing and holding hands. As children
become increasingly aware of the social rules governing sexual behavior and language (such as the importance of modesty or which words are considered "naughty"), they may try to test these rules by using naughty words. They may also ask more questions about sexual matters, such as where babies come from, and why boys and girls are physically different. (For more, see Table 1.)

Age	Uncommon/Problematic Behaviors
Preschool children (less than 4 years)	■ Exploring and touching private parts, in public and in private ■ Rubbing private parts (with hand or against objects) ■ Showing private parts to others ■ Trying to touch mother's or other women's breasts ■ Removing clothes and wanting to be naked ■ Attempting to see other people when they are naked or undressing (such as in the bathroom) ■ Asking questions about their own—and others'—bodies and bodily functions ■ Talking to children their own age about bodily functions such as "poop" and "pee"
Young Children (approximately 4-6 years)	■ Purposefully touching private parts (masturbation), occasionally in the presence of others ■ Attempting to see other people when they are naked or undressing ■ Mimicking dating behavior (such as kissing, or holding hands) ■ Talking about private parts and using "naughty" words, even when they don't understand the meaning ■ Exploring private parts with children their own age (such as "playing doctor", "I'll show you mine if you show me yours," etc.)
School-Aged Children (approximately 7-12 years)	■ Purposefully touching private parts (masturbation), usually in private ■ Playing games with children their own age that involve sexual behavior (such as "truth or dare", "playing family," or "boyfriend/girlfriend") ■ Attempting to see other people naked or undressing ■ Looking at pictures of naked or partially naked people ■ Viewing/listening to sexual content in media (television, movies, games, the Internet, music, etc.) ■ Wanting more privacy (for example, not wanting to undress in front of other people) and being reluctant to talk to adults about sexual issues ■ Beginnings of sexual attraction to/interest in peers



Once children enter grade school (approximately ages 7–12), their awareness of social rules increases and they become more modest and want more privacy, particularly around adults. Although self touch (masturbation) and sexual play continue, children at this age are likely to hide these activities from adults. Curiosity about adult sexual behavior increases—particularly as puberty approaches—and children may begin to seek out sexual content in television, movies, and printed material. Telling jokes and "dirty" stories is common. Children approaching puberty are likely to start displaying romantic and sexual interest in their peers. (For more, see Table 1.)

Although parents often become concerned when a child shows sexual behavior, such as touching another child's private parts, these behaviors are not uncommon in developing children. Most sexual play is an expression of children's natural curiosity and should not be a cause for concern or alarm. In general, "typical" childhood sexual play and exploration:

- Occurs between children who play together regularly and know each other well
- Occurs between children of the same general age and physical size
- Is spontaneous and unplanned
- Is infrequent
- Is voluntary (the children agreed to the behavior, none of the involved children seem uncomfortable or upset)
- Is easily diverted when parents tell children to stop and explain privacy rules

Some childhood sexual behaviors indicate more than harmless curiosity, and are considered sexual behavior problems. Sexual behavior problems may pose a risk to the safety and well-being of the child and other children. (For more on this topic, see the National Child Traumatic Stress Network's factsheet, Understanding and Coping with Sexual Behavior Problems in Children: Information for Parents and Caregivers at



http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/sexualbehaviorproblems.pdf.) Sexual behavior problems include any act that:

- Is clearly beyond the child's developmental stage (for example, a three-year-old attempting to kiss an adult's genitals)
- Involves threats, force, or aggression
- Involves children of widely different ages or abilities (such as a 12-year-old "playing doctor" with a four-year-old)
- Provokes strong emotional reactions in the child—such as anger or anxiety

Responding to Sexual Behaviors

Situations like the one described at the beginning of this handout can be unsettling for parents. However, these situations also offer excellent opportunities to assess how much children understand and to teach important information about sexual matters.

The first step is to try to figure out what actually happened. To do this, it's important to stay calm. Staying calm will allow you to make clear decisions about what you say and/or do, rather than acting on strong emotions.

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To remain composed, try taking a long, deep breath, counting to ten, or even closing the door and stepping away for a couple of minutes before saying anything. In the case described above, a parent might calmly tell the children that it's time to get dressed and then ask each child to go to a different room in the house. After taking a few moments to collect his or her thoughts—and to consult with a spouse or partner if feeling very unsettled— the parent could then talk to each child one-on-one.

When talking to children about sexual behaviors, it's important to maintain a calm and even tone of voice and to ask open-ended questions as much as possible, so the children can tell what happened in their own words, rather than just answering yes or no. So, in this case, a parent might ask each child:

- What were you doing?
- How did you get the idea?
- How did you learn about this?
- How did you feel about doing it?

In the opening scenario, all of the children involved were about the same age, had been playmates for some time, and seemed to be enjoying their game. So, it's likely the children were just curious and playing around and that no one was upset about what happened. If you encounter a situation where the children are a little embarrassed but otherwise not distressed, this can present an ideal opportunity for teaching the children about healthy boundaries and rules about sexual behavior.

Educating Children about Sexual Issues

Myth: Talking about sex with my children will just encourage them to become sexually active.

Fact: In a recent survey of American teens, 9 out of 10 teens said it would be easier to delay sexual activity and prevent unwanted pregnancy if they were able to have "more open, honest conversations" with their parents on these topics.[7] When you talk honestly with your children about sexual issues, you can give them the knowledge and skills they need to keep safe and to make good decisions about relationships and intimacy.

Just because a behavior is typical doesn't mean the behavior should be ignored. Often, when children participate in sexual behavior it indicates that they need to learn something. Teach what the child needs to know, given the situation. In this case, for example, the parent might teach the children that it's okay to be curious about other people's bodies, but that private parts should be kept private, even with friends.

Although children usually respond well when parents take the time to give them correct information and answer their questions, it is important to provide information that is appropriate to the child's age and developmental level. In Table 2, you will find an overview of some of the most important information and safety messages for children of various ages. Keep in mind that you do not need to bombard children with information all at once. Let the situation—and the child's questions—guide the lessons you share. The important thing is to let children know that you are ready to listen and to answer whatever questions they may have.

Too often, children get the majority of their sexual education from other children and from media sources such as television shows, songs, movies, and video games. Not only is this information often wrong, it may have very little to do with sexual values that parents want to convey. Explicit adult sexual activities are sometimes found during "family time" television shows, in commercials, and on cartoon/children's channels, and can have an influence on children's behaviors.

Controlling media exposure and providing appropriate alternatives is an important part of teaching children about sexual issues. Get to know the rating systems of games, movies, and television shows and make use of the parental controls available through many internet, cable, and satellite providers.

However, don't assume that just by activating those controls you will be taking care of the situation. It's very important for you to be aware of what your children are watching on television and online, and make time to watch television with them. When appropriate, you can use this time as a springboard to talk about sexual or relationship issues, and to help children develop the skills to make healthy decisions about their behavior and relationships.

Preschool children (less than 4 years)

Basic Information	Safety Information
■ Boys and girls are different ■ Accurate names for body parts of boys and girls ■ Babies come from mommies ■ Rules about personal boundaries (for example, keeping private parts covered, not touching other children's private parts) ■ Give simple answers to all questions about the body and bodily functions. 	■ The difference between "okay" touches (which are comforting, pleasant, and welcome) and "not okay" touches (which are intrusive, uncomfortable, unwanted, or painful) ■ Your body belongs to you ■ Everyone has the right to say "no" to being touched, even by grownups ■ No one—child or adult–has the right to touch your private parts ■ It's okay to say "no" when grownups ask you to do things that are wrong, such as touching private parts or keeping secrets from mommy or daddy ■ There is a difference between a "surprise"–which is something that will be revealed sometime soon, like a present—and a "secret," which is something you're never supposed to tell. Stress that it is never okay to keep secrets from mommy and daddy ■ Who to tell if people do "not okay" things to you, or ask you to do "not okay" things to them
Young Children (approximately 4-6 years)	
Basic Information	Safety Information
■ Boys' and girls' bodies change when they get older. ■ Simple explanations of how babies grow in their mothers' wombs and about the birth process. ■ Rules about personal boundaries (such as, keeping private parts covered, not touching other children's private parts) ■ Simple answers to all questions about the body and bodily functions ■ Touching your own private parts can feel nice, but is something done in private	■ Sexual abuse is when someone touches your private parts or asks you to touch their private parts ■ It is sexual abuse even if it is by someone you know ■ Sexual abuse is NEVER the child's fault ■ If a stranger tries to get you to go with him or her, run and tell a parent, teacher, neighbor, police officer, or other trusted adult ■ Who to tell if people do "not okay" things to you, or ask you to do "not okay" things to them
School-Aged Children (approximately 7-12 years)	
Basic Information	Safety Information
■ What to expect and how to cope with the changes of puberty (including menstruation and wet dreams) ■ Basics of reproduction, pregnancy, and childbirth ■ Risks of sexual activity (pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases) ■ Basics of contraception ■ Masturbation is common and not associated with long term problems but should be done in private	■ Sexual abuse may or may not involve touch ■ How to maintain safety and personal boundaries when chatting or meeting people online ■ How to recognize and avoid risky social situations ■ Dating rules

If you are unsure of what to say to your child about sexual issues, don't be afraid to do some research. In addition to talking to your pediatrician or doctor, you can turn to online resources such as the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States' (SIECUS) *Families Are Talking* websites (listed below). There are also several excellent books available on talking to children about sexual issues, as well as books that you and your children can read together. (For a

partial listing, see Table 3.)

For You	
Books	Haffner, Debra W. (2008). *From diapers to dating: A parent's guide to raising sexually healthy children– from infancy to middle school, 2nd edition*. New York: Newmarket Press. Author Debra Haffner provides practical advice and guidelines to help you talk to children and early adolescents about sexuality. Includes techniques to identify and examine your own sexual values so that you can share these messages with your children. Hickling, Meg. (2005). *The new speaking of sex: What your children need to know and when they need to know it*. Kelowna, BC, Canada: Wood Lake Publishing, Inc. This update of the bestselling *More Speaking of Sex* is packed with no-nonsense, accurate, and gently funny information on sexuality and sexual health. Author Meg Hickling dispels misconceptions and unhealthy beliefs about sex, provides guidelines on how to talk with children at various stages of their development, and offers examples of how to answer tough questions. Roffman, Deborah M. (2002). *But how'd I get in there in the first place? Talking to your young child about sex*. New York: Perseus Publishing. Sexuality and family life educator Deborah Roffman provides clear, sensible guidelines on how to talk confidently with young children about sexual issues, including how to answer sometimes awkward questions about sexuality, conception, and birth. Roffman, Deborah M. (2001). *Sex and sensibility: The thinking parent's guide to talking sense about sex*. New York: Perseus Publishing. This book is designed to inspire honest communication about sexuality between parents and their children. It focuses on the core skills parents need in order to interpret and respond to virtually any question or situation, with the goal of empowering children through knowledge.
Online Resources	The Committee for Children offers tips on how to teach children about safe touch (http://www.cfchildren.org/issues/abuse/touchsaferules/) as well as general information on how to talk to your child about sexual issues (http://www.cfchildren.org/issues/abuse/touchsafety/). The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States' (SIECUS) *Families Are Talking* websites contain a wealth of information and resources to help you talk with children about sexuality and related issues (http://www.familiesaretalking.org and http://www.lafamiliahabla.org).
For Your Children	
Books	Bell, Ruth. (1998). *Changing bodies, changing lives: Expanded 3rd edition: A book for teens on sex and relationships*. New York: TimesBooks. *For ages 9 and up.* Designed to help young people make informed decisions about their lives, *Changing bodies, changing lives* provides answers to tough questions about how the body works and about sex, love, and relationships. It's packed with illustrations, checklists, and resources, as well as stories, poems, and cartoons from hundreds of teenagers. Brown, Laurie Krasny. (2000). *What's the big secret? Talking about sex with girls and boys*. New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers. *For ages 4–8*. This colorful and chatty book uses illustrations, cartoons, and very accessible text to explain the basics of anatomy, reproduction, pregnancy, and birth. Also discusses feelings, touching, and privacy. Hansen, Diane. (2007). *Those are MY private parts*. Redondo Beach, CA: Empowerment Productions. *For ages 4–8*. This short, easy-to-read book uses colorful illustrations and catchy rhymes to teach children that no one—relative, friend or neighbor—has a right to touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable.

For Your Children (continued)

Harris, Robie H. (2006) *It's NOT the stork: A book about girls, boys, babies, bodies, families and friends*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

For ages 4 and up. This lively, engaging book uses two cartoon characters–a curious bird and a squeamish bee–to give voice to the many emotions and reactions children experience while learning about their bodies. The information provided is up-to-date, age-appropriate, and scientifically accurate, and is designed to help kids feel proud, knowledgeable, and comfortable about their bodies and how they were born.

Harris, Robie H. (2004) *It's perfectly normal: Changing bodies, growing up, sex, and sexual health*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

For ages 10 and up. Providing accurate, unbiased answers to nearly every imaginable question, from conception and puberty to birth control and AIDS, *It's perfectly normal* provides young people with the information they need to make responsible decisions and to stay healthy.

Harris, Robie H. (2004) *It's so amazing!: A book about eggs, sperm, birth, babies, and families*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

For ages 4 and up. *It's so amazing!* provides answers to children's questions about reproduction, sex, and sexuality. The comic-book style artwork and clear, lively text reflects an elementary school child's interest in science and how things work. Throughout the book, a curious bird and a squeamish bee help tell the story of how a baby is made–from the moment an egg and sperm join, through pregnancy, to birth. *It's so amazing!* also addresses and provides reassuring, age appropriate information on love, sex, gender, families, heterosexuality, homosexuality, sexual abuse, and HIV and AIDS, while giving children a healthy understanding of their bodies.

Madaras, Lynda. (2007). *The "What's happening to my body?" book for girls, revised 3rd edition*. New York: Newmarket Press.

Madaras, Lynda. (2007). *The "What's happening to my body?" book for boys, revised 3rd edition*. New York: Newmarket Press.

For ages 10 and up. These books—part of the acclaimed *"What's Happening To My Body?"* book series by the same author—provide sensitive straight talk on children's changing bodies, diet and exercise, romantic and sexual feelings, and puberty in the opposite sex. They also include information on sensitive topics such as eating disorders, sexually transmitted diseases, steroid use, and birth control.

Mayle, Peter. (2000). *"What's happening to me?" An illustrated guide to puberty*. New York: Kensington Publishing.

For ages 9–12. For more than 20 years, *"What's happening to me?"* has been helping young people—and their parents—navigate the "time in between" childhood and adolescence. Mayle, Peter. (2000). *Where did I come from? The facts of life without any nonsense and with illustrations*. New York: Kensington Publishing.

For ages 4–8. Dedicated to "red-faced parents everywhere," *Where did I come from?* covers the basic facts of sexuality from physiology to love-making, orgasm, conception, growth inside the womb, and childbirth. The illustrations are clear and realistic, and the text does an excellent job of explaining things in an age-appropriate way.

Schaefer, Valorie. (1998) *The care & keeping of you: The body book for girls*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company Publications.

For ages 7-12. This "head -to- toe" guide addresses the variety of changes that occur with puberty, and answers many of the questions girls have, from hair care to healthy eating, bad breath to bras, periods to pimples, and everything in between.

Parents play a pivotal role in helping their children develop healthy attitudes and behaviors towards sexuality. Although talking with your children about sex may feel outside your comfort zone, there are many resources available to help you begin and continue the conversation about sexuality. Providing close supervision,



and
providing clear, positive messages about modesty, boundaries and privacy are crucial as children move through the stages of childhood. By talking openly with your children about relationships, intimacy, and sexuality, you can foster their healthy growth and development.

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