



Sexual Development in Children

In 2017, MNCASA released a [report](#) on identifying and treating children with sexual behavior problems. The findings showed that there was a need for greater understanding around sexual development and sexual behaviors in children. This resource was developed in hopes of creating a better understanding of healthy and problematic sexual development in children.

It can be difficult to recognize that, like adults, children are sexual beings. Children will be curious about sex, sexuality, and the human body, which can make it challenging to know whether a certain behavior is considered healthy or problematic. Below is some general information on common and uncommon behaviors based on age groups and suggestions for conversations that parents can have with their children to help encourage healthy sexual development.

Generally, sexual play or behavior in children can be described as healthy, normative, or typical if it has the following attributes:

- It occurs between children who know each other well and have an ongoing, mutual play or school friendship.
- It occurs between children of the same general age, size, and social and emotional development.
- It is spontaneous, lighthearted, unplanned, and infrequent.
- It does not cause physical or emotional harm to the child or others
- It is voluntary. The children have agreed to the behavior, are giggling and having fun, and do not appear uncomfortable or upset.
- Children are able to follow the rules, and the behavior is easily redirected if adults set limits, ask children to stop, or explain privacy rules.

Sexual behavior or play can become concerning or problematic if it has the following attributes:

- The behavior is beyond the child's developmental stage.
- It occurs frequently.
- It interferes with the child's social and cognitive development.
- It involves threats, pressure, force, coercion, or aggression.
- It occurs between children of widely different ages, or cognitive or developmental abilities.
- The child does not stop the behavior when redirected by an adult.
- It causes strong emotional responses in the child, like anger or anxiety.
- It causes changes in the child's typical behaviors, interests, or activities.
- It involves inappropriate or unsafe use of sexual body parts (ex. Inserting objects into sexual body parts).

Age Group: Infancy (0-2 years)

Common Behaviors

- Display curiosity about their own body, including their genitals
- Touch their own genitals (masturbation), in both public and private settings
- Are not shy about nudity
- Male babies may experience erections

Ways Parents can Encourage Healthy Development

- Use correct names for body parts (penis, vagina, etc.)
- Explain basic differences between male and female anatomy
- Provide simple responses to questions about the child's body or bodily functions
- Help children begin to understand how to interact respectfully and appropriately with other children of the same age

Age Group: Pre-School Aged Children (2-4 years)

Common Behaviors

- Occasional masturbation, either publicly or privately, is likely to occur as a soothing behavior, not for sexual pleasure
- May show or engage in playful exploration of genitals with other children of similar age
- May raise questions about their bodies, bodily functions, sexuality, or reproduction
- Be curious about adult bodies (wanting to be in the bathroom with parents, touching mother's breasts)
- Continued lack of shyness about nudity (may remove clothes or diapers)
- May use slang words for body parts or bodily functions

Uncommon Behaviors

- Have excessive interest or knowledge about specific sexual acts or explicit sexual language beyond their age development
- Unable to redirect their genital play or masturbation when asked
- Engaging in adult-like sexual behavior with other children

Ways Parents can Encourage Healthy Development

- Provide basic responses about reproduction
- Explain the difference between public and private, and encourage an understanding of when behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate
- Differentiate between wanted and unwanted touch
- Begin teaching children about consent and boundaries. Children should ask before touching another individual, and children have the right to refuse touch from anyone else at any time

Age Group: Young Children (4-6 years)

Common Behaviors

- Intentionally touch genitals, sometimes in public
- Able to experience orgasms
- Children become more aware of differences in male and female bodies
- Imitate dating behavior (hand-holding, kissing, etc.)
- Can be taught that genital exploration and masturbation should be done in private
- Talking about genitals and using sexual slang or swear words even if they don't understand what it means

Uncommon Behaviors

- Have excessive interest or knowledge about specific sexual acts or explicit sexual language beyond their age development
- Unable to redirect their genital play or masturbation when asked
- Engaging in adult-like sexual behavior with other children

Ways Parents can Encourage Healthy Development

- Allow space for discussions on how children experience their gender identity
- Explain that there are different sexual orientations
- Teach children that masturbation is done in private
- Continue providing simple responses for questions raised about sexuality, reproduction, or bodies
- Explain that individuals have personal rights and responsibilities when it comes to their body and sexuality (ex. Your body belongs only to you, and you should treat all people equally)

Age Group: School-Aged Children (7-12 years)

Common Behaviors

- Puberty begins. Child may express increased need for privacy and independence.
- Begin to understand social norms around masturbation, and will engage in the behavior in private
- Partake in games involving sexual behavior like “Truth or Dare” or “Spin the Bottle”
- Watch or listen to media outlets with sexual content or nudity (pictures, TV, movies, music, games, websites)
- Begin to develop sexual orientation, and may be sexually attracted to their peers and desire a romantic partner
- Trying to see other people naked or undressing
- May express increased curiosity about adult bodies
- Mood swings are expected as children experience puberty

Uncommon Behaviors

- Regularly engaging in adult-like sexual behavior
- Behaving sexually in public

Ways Parents can Encourage Healthy Development

- Provide a basic explanation of human reproduction and pregnancy, including intercourse
- Continue providing information on physical aspects of puberty and explain the changes in their body that children will experience
- Talk with children about social and emotional aspects of puberty. Validate the new needs and emotions that the child may be experiencing
- Provide age-appropriate information on sexuality, sexual behaviors, and sexually transmitted infections, etc.
- Help children develop their critical thinking skills in working through identifying differences between fact and fiction in media images and pop culture representations of sexuality
- Continue supporting their understanding of consent and boundaries in friendships and relationships

Age Group: Adolescence (13-18 years)

Common Behaviors

- Increased interest in romantic relationships (dating or sexual)
- Physically able to become pregnant
- Masturbation in private will likely continue
- May feel the need to give in to peer pressure

Uncommon Behaviors

- Public masturbation
- Sexual interest directed toward children of a much younger age

Ways Parents can Encourage Healthy Development

- Provide information in greater detail about reproduction, pregnancy, and birth
- Educate children about sexually transmitted infections and ways to protect themselves (birth control, condom use, etc.)
- Explain the importance of respecting the boundaries and personal space of others and of themselves
- Emphasize that they always have the right to say “NO” to unwanted sexual contact
- Guide children in understanding body image and changes, stereotypes, and pressure to abide by society’s perception of gender roles
- Discuss differences between healthy and unhealthy romantic relationships

Resources

The information provided in this fact sheet was drawn from multiple sources listed below. These resources also offer additional information on sexual development in children and sexual behavior problems.

- <http://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/what-is-age-appropriate>
- https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//sexual_development_and_behavior_in_children.pdf
- <https://pcavt.org/stages-of-healthy-sexual-development.html>
- https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2013-01/saam_2013_an-overview-of-healthy-childhood-sexual-development.pdf