

Genital Touching in Toddlers and Preschoolers

(Adapted from: <http://www.drspock.com/article>)

Discovery: From inside the womb, babies are discovering their bodies. After birth and throughout the first year of life, a baby will experience more play and fascination with their hands, toes, ears, and eyes. As they grow this first year, a baby boy will also discover his penis and a baby girl, her vulva. In fact, it's just as natural for babies to discover and touch their genitals as it is for them to discover their fingers and toes. They are learning that it feels good to touch all the parts of their bodies. How you react to your child's discoveries sends an early message about sexuality. Think about the values you want to impart and the best way to get your message across: If you say "no" in a stern voice and move your child's hand away, you are teaching him that touching one's own genitals is bad; even those parts of his body are bad. In contrast, if you acknowledge that it feels good to touch their body, you affirm your child's sense that his body is good.

It's exploration not masturbating: Some preschool boys seem to touch their penis constantly: at naptime, at preschool, in the grocery store, watching television, visiting family, etc. Some toddler and preschool girls seem to "hump" every stuffed animal and couch arm they pass. Many parents have asked me in desperation, "How can I stop my child from masturbating?" First, we need to take off our adult lenses and realize that children are not, in fact, masturbating for erotic purposes. Preschool children touch their genitals simply because it feels good and it's comforting: Some children suck their thumbs, some twirl their hair, and some boys hold their penises. Some children touch their genitals at naptime or bedtime to calm themselves. Although this behavior is to be expected, a child does need to learn over time that touching one's own genitals should only be done in a private place, like a bedroom or the bathroom.

Teaching privacy: When you set about teaching your child this valuable social lesson, once again you need to think about how best to convey your message without introducing an element of shame. If you are comfortable with genital touching, you could say something like, "Ben, I know that it feels good to touch your penis. But, you should only do it in a private place. What's a private place in our house?" You'll probably have to remind your child many times about the appropriate places for genital exploration. Your child isn't likely to really develop a mature sense of privacy until they are between the ages of five and seven years. That's not to say that it isn't important to start teaching your child about privacy when they are younger, just don't be surprised if your four-year-old is still completely comfortable walking out of the bathroom with their pants down.

Normal play: "Playing Doctor" or "Playing House" are typical ways that boys and girls are able to see how other children's bodies, are similar and different from their own. As such, these games can be positive learning experiences for the child. Young children may hug, kiss, look and perhaps touch each other.

When it may be concerning: However, it is important to distinguish between situations where children are engaged in play appropriate for their age and situations where the interaction is more reflective of adult sexual behavior. For example, toddlers do not typically engage in oral-genital contact. Children who do exhibit these behaviors may be mimicking what they have seen in sexually explicit media. In some cases, acting out adult sexual behaviors may be a sign that a child has been sexually abused. Excessive genital touching may be a response to emotional turmoil like the ways that many children suck their thumbs or compulsively twirl their hair as a response to stress. In some other cases it may be a sign that the child may have been sexually abused. If you have concerns that your child has been abused you can call your child's pediatrician, DHS Hotline 855-503-SAFE, or KIDS Center for assistance and information.