

Talking to Your Child about Sex & Sexual Abuse

(Adapted from: Georgia Center for Child Advocacy)

Start Early

- Children are already hearing about sex through the media and other children.
- It is best to start talking with children about sexuality in early childhood.
- Always be open and available and listen carefully to what your child asks.
- Keep the language simple but always use correct terms.
- Do not try to cover everything at once. It is a conversation that should happen repeatedly during a child's development.

Is There Such a Thing as Giving Too Much Information?

- No. Information does not encourage a child to be sexually active.
- Most parents are uncomfortable talking about sex, so be open about this and don't cover up your feelings or avoid the issue.
- Children just want to know that they are normal. So, teach them that it is "normal" for everyone to be different.
- Answer honestly, and if you do not know an answer, look it up together, ask your pediatrician.

Share your Family Values

- Set good examples for children.
- Be clear about your values and let them know other families may have different values.
- Let children know what you expect of them and help them to understand consequences- Do not use scare tactics.
- Be encouraging- allow them to explore their thoughts and feelings about sexuality.

When a Young Child Asks...

- **"Where did I come from?"**- give them a simple, straightforward answer like "You were made in Mommy's tummy, and that's where you grew until you were ready to be born" or "A seed from Daddy and an egg from Mommy mixed together and formed a new baby- you."
- **"What is sex?"** – "Sex is a kind of cuddling Mommy and Daddy do to show how much they love each other" or "Sex is a way grown ups who love each other can be as close as possible, to cuddle and kiss in a special way."
- **"How is the new baby going to get out of your tummy?"**- Say something simple like "After a long time, the baby grows too big for Mommy's tummy, so it has to be born" or "After the baby gets too big Daddy will take Mommy to the hospital, where the doctors can help the baby to be born." Provide older children with more specific information.

Talk to your Children about Sexual Abuse

- Plan a time for you and your child to sit down and begin to discuss this topic.
- Explain to your child what parts of the body are private and should never be touched by another adult or child.
- Let your child know that if anyone touches them in these private areas they must come and tell you- no matter who it is.
- Use everyday opportunities to talk- if your child is uncomfortable around a certain person, ask why. If the worry is caused by something seen or heard, talk about it.
- Revisit the topic at different ages- talk to your child about relationships, boundaries, and sexual abuse from early childhood through the teenage years.

Childhood Sexual Development

(Adapted from: Georgia Center for Child Advocacy and Darkness to Light)

Normal Sexual Development

Infancy - Birth to Age 2

Much of an infant's learning is sensory related, focused on touch and smell. One of the first things they learn is their own body. Boys discover their penis around 7 months and girls discover their vulva around 9 months. Infant boys have erections regularly and infant girls lubricate, but this not a response to erotic stimulation. These are natural responses to touch, friction, or the need to urinate. Children at this age:

- Learn about love and trust through relationships with caregivers.
- Develop a sense of trust.
- Learn and explore their bodies through the sense of touch, including their genitals.
- May have spontaneous reactions that appear sexual but are not (e.g. erection or lubrication).
- Have no inhibitions about nudity.
- Begin to learn distinction between male/female and learn expected behaviors.

Adults can facilitate healthy sexual development by:

- 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 or bath, tell child that genitals are off limits).

Toddler and Preschool Years - Ages 2 to 5

By the age of 3, children will have a clear sense of whether they are a boy or a girl and they will become very curious about the opposite sex. Because genitals are usually covered, interest in these areas may be heightened. This is a great opportunity to introduce the concept of privacy for themselves and others. Teach and encourage the child to use correct terminology to describe genitalia: penis and vagina. Children at this age:

- Develop language to describe genitalia.
- Should clearly know the differences between males and females.
- May know basics of human reproduction (e.g. babies grow inside mother's tummy).
- May show curiosity about adult genitalia (e.g. may try to see Mommy nude).
- Have no inhibitions about nudity.
- May play house or doctor or engage in consensual genital exploration with same-age peers.
- May self-stimulate/self-touch often.

Adults can facilitate healthy sexual development by:

- Teaching your child the difference between comfortable and appropriate touch, and uncomfortable and inappropriate touch.
- Modeling comfortable touch by not forcing child to have physical contact (e.g. no forced hugs or kisses, no wrestling if child protests).
- Modeling privacy during bathing and toileting.
- Giving child permission to be private about his/her own nudity.
- Using everyday opportunities to teach the fundamentals of sexuality by giving simple answer to questions.
- Teaching child that touching oneself feels good, is OK, and is done in private.
- Teaching child to respect others' boundaries and privacy.

Middle Childhood - Ages 5 to 8

Gender role socialization is heightened during this period and children tend to show a strong preference for gender typed clothing and activity. Some children in this age range will self-stimulate/self-touch, but only a minority; it will increase again during adolescence. Children at this age:

- Begin to have more stable friendships with children of the same sex.
- Will want to be liked their peers and start to feel peer pressure.
- May be affected by stories they hear in media about violence, sex, or drugs.
- Understand physical, behavioral, and emotional distinctions between males and females (gender identity solidifies and stabilizes).
- Should have a basic understanding of puberty (some children, especially girls, will show early signs of puberty).
- Should have a basic understanding of human reproduction.
- May understand differences in sexual orientation.
- Will begin to become modest about nudity.
- May self-stimulate/self-touch or engage in consensual genital exploration with same-age (and/or same-sex) peers.

Adults can facilitate healthy sexual development by:

- 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 genitals), and about what is and is not appropriate during peer interaction.
- Modeling healthy, intimate adult relationships and effective communication.
- Teaching child about male and female puberty (by 7-8 years old).
- Using everyday opportunities to teach child about sexuality and reproduction (children should know the "birds and the bees" by no later than 9 years old; research also shows that children whose parents talk with them about sexuality are less likely to become sexually active at an early age).

Recognizing Healthy Behavior

Why Children Self-Stimulate/Self-Touch

Self-stimulation/self-touch is normal! There is nothing harmful to the child about self-stimulation/self-touch itself. It does not cause physical or emotional problems for the child. Children often begin self-stimulating/self-touch at around 18 months and will peak between ages 3-5.

- For infants and toddlers, this usually involves body sensations, cuddling and touching, and playing with toys.
- Children will self-stimulate/self-touch as part of natural curiosity about their bodies.
- It can be a form of pleasure or method of self-soothing during times of stress.
- Many children engage in sexual behavior and show sexual interest throughout their entire childhood.
- These sexual behaviors are usually not overtly sexual but are more exploratory and playful.

How Parents Should React to Self-Stimulation/Self-Touch

- Remain calm. It is important for a parent not to overreact to self-stimulation/self-touch.
- If you catch a child in the act don't act surprised and do not punish the child. Provide reassurance and avoid saying anything that can cause guilt.
- Punishment can lead to negative effects on the child's self esteem, body image and later development of sexual identity.
- Explain that this is something that should be done in private (e.g. the child's bedroom or bathroom).

Recognizing Unhealthy Behavior (from The Child Molestation Research and Prevention Institute, © 2007)

Signs a child is being abused

- Touching genitals of others or inducing fear or threats of force.
- Sexually explicit conversations with significant age difference.
- Repeated peeping, exposing, obscenities, or pornographic interest.
- Oral, vaginal, anal penetration of dolls, other children, or animals.
- Any genital injury or bleeding not explained by accidental cause.
- Sexualizing relationships or preoccupation with sexual play.
- Self-stimulation/self-touch is constant.

Inappropriate Sexual Exposure

- Any form of sexual activity with adolescents and adults.
- Viewing pornography or other sexually explicit material.
- Witnessing sexual behaviors between adults.
- Sexual play with another child that is 3 or more years younger or older, or with a child who has more sophisticated sexual knowledge.
- A child who forces any sexual activity whatsoever.

Inappropriate Sexual Behaviors

- Preoccupation with sexual themes, displaying sexually aggressive behaviors.
- Sexually explicit conversations.
- Precocious sexual knowledge (e.g. terminology, sexual positions).
- Preoccupation with self-stimulation/self-touch.
- Simulating foreplay with dolls or peers.
- Engaging in sexual behaviors in public, such as sexual exposure, rubbing or self-stimulation/self-touch.

Identifying Children with Possible Sex-Specific Problems

- Any child using sexual language beyond his or her age group. This suggests that the child has been looking at sexual material or engaging in sexual behavior beyond his or her age group.
- Any child who acts out sexually at school.
- Any child who continues to engage in chronic sexually harassing behavior after an adult has told the child to stop.
- Any child who others report as having excessively sexually provocative behavior.
- Any child attempting to get another child or adult nude, especially at school or outside of home.
- Any child who is overly attentive to younger children (3+ years younger).
- Any child suspected of having a sexually transmitted disease .

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