

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN CHILDREN

Sexual development is an important part of a child's development beginning in infancy and continuing into adulthood.

Throughout childhood, children engage in a variety of sexual behaviors which are part of normal, healthy development. Below is a list of some common behaviors exhibited by children during different developmental stages.

Children Birth to 2 years...

- begin to explore their bodies, including their genitals
- derive pleasurable sensations from genital stimulation
- experience penile erections and vaginal lubrication
- may touch others' genitals
- may enjoy being nude and undressing in front of others
- begin to learn names for body parts, sometimes including genitals

Children 2 to 6 years...

- may use slang or correct terms for genital parts
- may derive pleasurable sensations by touching their genitals
- may experience orgasm
- learn to identify themselves and others by gender
- express curiosity about differences between males and females which may lead to exploration with peers
- may engage in sexual curiosity play with same age peers and/or siblings involving undressing, looking at and touching each others' genitals
- may enjoy undressing and catching others undressing
- may express love feelings (e.g. wanting others to play boyfriend/girlfriend or husband/wife) for parents or close relatives

Children 6 to 12 years...

- begin to show increased modesty
- may continue to masturbate, but will more likely masturbate in privacy
- may demonstrate increased knowledge of sexual behavior, including masturbation and intercourse
- may demonstrate understanding of sex as it relates to pregnancy
- may engage in sex games with peers and siblings which may become more secretive and increase in sophistication, including kissing, mutual masturbation, and "playing doctor"
- may demonstrate increased use of sexual language

- may demonstrate increased interest in sexually explicit pictures, television, etc.
- may begin to experience early pubertal changes

While the behaviors described above are generally considered reflections of normal healthy sexual development, some childhood sexual behaviors raise appropriate concern and may stem from abusive experiences or inappropriate exposure to adult sexuality. The list below describes behaviors that raise concern and are generally considered problematic for children ages 2 to 12 years.

- age-appropriate knowledge of adult sexual behavior
- obsessive focus on sex-related issues which interferes with child's participation in developmentally appropriate activities
- sex play between children of significantly different ages or sizes
- sex play that involves coercion or force
- insertion of objects into the vagina or anus
- masturbation involving objects
- masturbation that is compulsive or public in nature
- attempts to put mouth on sex parts
- requests to engage in adult sexual acts
- inserting tongue into mouth of other people

While these sexual behaviors are often quite troubling to parents, it is important to remember that they are essentially learned behaviors which children can unlearn. Children exhibiting age inappropriate sexual behavior can learn more appropriate means of expressing their emerging sexuality. In fact, it is usually best to respond to inappropriate sexual behaviors much the way we respond to other problem behaviors. First, it is important to communicate clearly and openly about which sexual behaviors are "okay" and which are "not okay." Next, it is important to encourage appropriate affectionate behavior by modeling and praising behaviors such as hugging, kissing, holding hands, giving "high fives," sitting with arms around another and saying "I love you." Finally, parents should establish negative consequences for exhibiting inappropriate sexual behaviors that can be administered in a calm, clear, consistent manner. Since it is often difficult for parents to respond effectively to children's inappropriate sexual behaviors, professional consultation is generally recommended to help parents respond most effectively to problematic sexual behaviors.