



Learning about sexuality is just as important to children as any other learning. Children need to feel that the sexual parts of their bodies are good, just as they feel that it is good to have arms and legs. They need to feel that it is good to be a boy or a girl. When parents talk with children about their bodies and about their sexual feelings and behaviour, children learn that it is okay to talk about these things with parents. Helping children to feel they can come to you to talk freely is one of the ways to help them sort out their values.

Influences on children's sexual behaviour

Parents

What you think and feel about children's sexuality has a strong influence on how you respond to your children's sexual behaviours. What your own parents said and did, religious beliefs, cultural background and your feelings all make a difference to how you handle your own children's sexual development. You can help your children to feel good, healthy and normal, or ashamed, guilty and bad by how you respond to them.

Television, radio and magazines

Children are influenced by what they see, hear and read. They see lots of sex in one way or another through television, videos, newspapers, billboards and magazines. They learn from what they read, see and hear about what it means to be a man or a woman, and how men and women act. Sometimes they see pictures of sexual violence and other sexual activity which they are not old enough to understand and this can worry them.

How adults treat each other

Children learn from parents—their first teachers. They see how you respond and treat each other and whether you for care and respect your partner. Some children may see their parents or other adults 'putting down' or making fun of people of the other sex, or even themselves. This sort of example can teach children to feel unhappy about being a boy or a girl. It may teach them to be afraid of people of the other sex or to think less of them.

Children's services and schools

Most schools and early childhood services teach children about their bodies, the proper names for parts of their bodies, and how to ask for help if they don't feel safe or if they are touched in ways that are not okay.

Children's sexual development

Children have sexual feelings from birth. Baby boys can have erections and boys and girls can get good feelings from touching the sexual parts of their bodies.

In the preschool years

- Babies usually do not explore their genitals (the sexual part of their bodies) until late in the first year as they are harder to see than body parts like hands and feet.
- They often touch their genitals because it feels good or because it comforts them when they are upset or worried.
- One-year-olds may like to play with their genitals when their nappies are off (or play with poo as well, if they get the chance). This is part of their natural curiosity.
- Under three-year-olds do not understand that all their body parts are a permanent part of them, so young boys may be worried that they might lose their penis when they see that girls don't have one, or girls may worry because they do not have a penis.
- Preschool children are often not modest about their bodies and like being naked.
- Preschool aged children are interested in looking at their own and other's bodies. They may play doctors and nurses in ways which involve looking and touching.
- They are often interested in parents' bodies and might want to touch them in the shower.
- They are interested in where babies come from and how babies get out of the mother's body. They are also interested in how they were born.
- By three years of age, children can say what sex they are (a boy or a girl). By the time they are six or seven they understand that this is something that does not usually change.
- Four-year-olds are very interested in toilet words and in what people do in bathrooms and toilets (especially other people's bathrooms). They often make jokes about toilets and like to use swear words if they know some.

Children's sexual development *cont*

In the early primary school years

- Children usually know that looking at each other's bodies and masturbation are things people do in private.
- There may still be sex play and 'looking' because they are curious, especially around girls' and boys' toilets.
- Children hear about sexual intercourse and talk about it, often using sex words that they have heard from their friends.
- They are still interested in pregnancy and birth.
- Children begin to focus more on same sex friendships.
- By the mid-primary years there is likely to be embarrassment about nudity and modesty in front of parents as well as others.
- There is the beginning of sex talk and joking with peers.
- Sex play may include kissing games, teasing and pretend games about marriage.

Masturbation

- In early childhood touching of the genitals may be:
 - finding out about the body
 - because it feels good
 - because the child wants to go to the toilet
 - because it gives a feeling of comfort when a child is worried.
- By early school years, children have learnt that masturbation is something that is done in private. (If children do it in public, it is likely to be because something is going wrong in their lives or sometimes because of abuse.)
- As children reach preschool age, you may want to talk about masturbation. Tell your child that masturbation feels enjoyable, but it is something done by themselves and not when they are with other people.
- If children masturbate a lot it is probably because something is troubling them. It is important to try to work out what it is. Very young children can't tell you, so you need to think about the likely causes, for example, new baby, parent going back to work, and then work out how to help them feel better.
- Telling a child who is masturbating for comfort not to do it, is likely to cause more tension. Try saying, 'I can see you are feeling tense, let me give you a hug'.

Touch

- Caring touch, such as hugs, stroking and cuddles by both parents, is very important for children to feel loved and to learn to show love and affection.
- Some fathers and stepfathers worry about cuddling or holding their child because of fears about being accused of sexual abuse. There is a difference between caring and sexual touch and it is the adult's responsibility not to cross the line.
- Touching children should be done as part of caring for a child, not because adults want to do it for their own pleasure.

What parents can do

From an early age children are often curious about where they came from. You can give them simple honest explanations and this is often all they want to know for a while. Explain that they were created from a sperm from their dad and an egg from their mum and that these grew in a special place inside their mum until they were born to be this special person.

As they get older they can be given more information, about how the sperm comes from dad's penis and the egg from mum's ovaries. Sometimes, because mum and dad love each other very much, they kiss and cuddle and their bodies get very close and dad puts his penis inside mum's vagina. Not all sperm find an egg to make into a baby, only special ones like the one that made (your child's name). Sometimes children want to hear this explanation over and over again.

Books with illustrations that children can follow are very helpful ways of helping children to understand how they were created.

- Answer children's questions honestly and naturally so they learn that they can talk to you about sex and ask you when they need to know something.
- Even if you use 'pet names' such as 'willy' for penis, children need to know the right names for all their body parts before they go to school.
- Show children picture books about their bodies and talk about how they work.
- If you find it hard to use the words to talk to your children about sex, try starting when they are very young so you won't be embarrassed. Children are very matter-of-fact and can cope with honest, factual information very easily.
- Show them that you value people of both sexes.

Most parents want their children to have a healthy attitude about sex. The way you behave or react in any talk about sex will affect how your children think and feel about it and about themselves.

Sex play

Childhood is a time of learning and exploration. Children explore their bodies during childhood including the sexual parts. They learn by looking at each other, by touching and by playing games about sex such as 'doctors and nurses'. Children's interest in sex and sex play does not take over their whole playtime but is just part of the many things they want to explore and learn about.

Sex play for children does not mean the same as it does for adults. For children it is about being curious about their bodies and about sex differences. While children are interested in looking at each other's bodies, most sex play is between children who are friends.

There is no need for parents to worry about sex play if the children are about the same age and size, and as long as they are not being made to do something they don't want to do—and if they are not doing things that children of that age don't usually know about. Sometimes it helps to be around when children are playing these games so you can be sure that it is safe play for all the children.

If you find your children playing sex games

Children usually enjoy these games just as they do other games. If children are found playing sex games they are often embarrassed, especially if they see their parents do not approve or are also embarrassed. If they are asked to stop and play something else they usually do, at least in the view of adults.

Many things which children find confusing or frightening are caused by the way parents react.

- If you find children playing sex games and you are not sure how to react, take a deep breath and think first.
- This way you will not do something that frightens or upsets them.
- Think about the message you want to get across and the impact. **This message will be important to the child's developing understanding of sex and sexuality.**

The message, and the way you give it, will depend on the age and maturity of the child. It might be that it is okay to be curious about others, but children need to learn that the sexual parts of their own and others' bodies are private.

You could say something like 'I see you are playing a game about your bodies, what do you think of that game? There are lots of ways to learn about bodies, one is looking at someone else, another is by looking in books. If you would like I will show you some books'.

When you need help about children's sexual behaviour

There are some things that children do which might mean that someone has been abusing them. If this happens, children need parents and other adults to protect them and keep them safe.

Talk it over with your doctor or a social worker if you find children:

- knowing more about sex than you would expect for the child's age, for example, preschool children knowing the details about or playing sexual intercourse
- with unexplained redness, soreness or injury of the genital areas (vagina, anus, bottom, penis or mouth)
- forcing others to play sex games
- playing sex games with much younger children
- talking about and playing about sex for a lot of the time, much more than other children
- masturbating so much that it interferes with their play, or in public after kindergarten age
- always drawing the sexual parts of bodies
- being afraid or upset when people talk about their bodies or sex
- showing extreme anxiety about being with a particular person without there seeming to be a reason.

Signs of stress, such as a return to bedwetting, soiling their pants or hurting themselves may be signs of sexual abuse but these behaviours can also be caused by other worries. **These are signs of stress that show that your child needs help.**

If you have worries about a child's sexual behaviour ring the Child Abuse Prevention Services Telephone 1800 688 009

Try not to question children too much as this can be distressing for the child and might make it harder for the child protection workers to learn what really happened.

If your child has been sexually abused

- Certain professionals by law have to report their suspicions of child sexual abuse. This may mean as a parent you will be requested to talk to people in authority. This can be a difficult time for you and your child while you both struggle with a range of emotions.
- If your child has been sexually abused you will probably feel extremely upset and angry. You will need to talk over your feelings with an understanding friend and probably with a professional who can support you, so you can support your child.
- If your child knows you are very upset, it might make her feel worse about what has happened. Try to keep your child and what he or she needs as your focus.
- Children who have been sexually abused can become confused about caring touch and sexual touch, and may become anxious and fearful that they are going to be abused again. It is important for parents to continue to show caring touch in ways that your child can manage and feel safe.

It is most important that children understand:

- **that sexual abuse of a child should never happen**
- **that no matter what they were told it is never the child's fault.**

Reminders

- Talking with your children about sex will not make them more interested in sex but it will help make it easier for them to come to you when they have questions.
- Talking with your children about their bodies is easier if you start when they are very young.
- Children need to learn that the sexual parts of their bodies are good.
- They need to know the right names for the sexual parts of their bodies.
- Children need to feel good about themselves, whether they are boys or girls.
- Give your children lots of hugs and cuddles and caring touch.
- What you believe, what you feel and what your children see you say and do, will have an impact on your children's sexual life.
- Children need most of all to feel loved and lovable.

Contacts

Care and Protection Services	24-hour	1300 556 729
Child Abuse Prevention Services	24-hour	1800 688 009
Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin 9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 0120 6207 8228
healthdirect Australia (free health advice line staffed by registered nurses)	24-hour	1800 022 222
Maternal and Child Health	8am–5pm Monday–Friday	6207 9977
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides, including Child abuse and neglect, Protect your child from paedophiles
www.raisingchildren.net.au	Covers a broad range of up-to-date parenting topics

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