



Sexuality & Your Child

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As a parent, you may be wondering when sexuality education for your child should begin. Many adults mistakenly believe sex education should begin at puberty.

Sexual learning, however, begins at birth. It is during the early years that your child will develop basic attitudes about sexuality.

What is sexuality?

- ▶ Everything that has to do with being male or female,
- ▶ How we think of our bodies,
- ▶ Our relationships with one another,
- ▶ How we grow and change,
- ▶ How we reproduce.

How do young children learn about sexuality?

- ▶ In the way they are touched, caressed, cuddled and cared for from birth,
- ▶ Through exploration and learning how their bodies feel to themselves,
- ▶ By learning what is OK and not OK to do,
- ▶ From the words family members say, and don't say, to refer to body parts,
- ▶ By observing how family members express affection and caring for one another.



Infancy to two years

Characteristics of sexual development

- ▶ Babies are curious. They explore their world and their own bodies.
- ▶ All babies touch their genitals. It feels good and is comforting to them.
- ▶ Babies develop trust and the capacity for pleasure as they are cared for, held and cuddled.
- ▶ Babies need to like all parts of their body, including genitals.

What can a parent do?

Help your baby recognize correct names for body parts. During dressing, diapering and bathing, practice saying names of body parts to your baby. If you use words such as penis, vulva and rectum as you would words such as eye, ear and nose, you will be more comfortable using these words in conversations when your child is older.

Two to three years

Characteristics of sexual development

- ▶ Toddlers have more curiosity about their own bodies than do infants.
- ▶ Masturbation increases, especially when your toddler is tired or going to sleep.
- ▶ They also have an increased awareness of being a boy or a girl.
- ▶ Young children imitate adult behavior associated with gender: They want to be "just like Mommy," or "just like Daddy."
- ▶ Toilet training is an important landmark for your toddler. Toddlers associate their genitals with what happens when they have bowel movements or urinate.

What can a parent do?

Praise and reinforce your toddler during toilet training. Promote your child's self-esteem and healthy sexual attitudes by accepting their questions and explorations.

Parents will respond differently as their children's awareness of sexuality grows

Many parents wonder how they should respond to their young child's genital play. Although genital play and masturbation are normal and universal in young children, parents' responses may vary. You may:

- ▶ Choose to ignore the behavior.
When your child is older you can explain about modesty and private behavior.
- ▶ Smile as your baby discovers his or her genitals. You may say, "I know that feels good," conveying respect for your child's feelings.

If your child's genital play is unacceptable to you, distract your child from that behavior by providing another activity.

Animals and reproduction

Young children love watching baby animals, and you can use animals to talk about reproduction.

Be sure, however, to also talk to your child about how people reproduce. Do not confuse your baby when he or she asks about human babies.

Do not punish your child for genital play. Punishment may result in long-lasting negative feelings about genital pleasure.

As you hold, cuddle and touch your baby, you are communicating and expressing love, your acceptance of your baby's maleness and femaleness and how important your baby is.

Both mothers and fathers should cuddle and touch babies. During your child's first three years, he or she is learning what it means to be a boy or a girl. Give your child the opportunity to explore a range of roles and activities that are not restricted by barriers that say "little girls do this," and "little boys don't do that."

Your child is learning about caring for others, sensitivity to feelings and solving problems.

Additional reading

- Gordon, Sol and Gordon, Judith, 1982. *Did the Sun Shine Before You Were Born?* Fayetteville, NY: Ed-U Press.
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