

Sexual development of children

When parents or carers talk to children about their bodies and about sexual behaviour and feelings, children learn that it's okay to talk about these things. Just as it is important for parents and carers to know about how a child grows and develops it is important to know about 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.

Babies usually explore their genitals (the sexual parts of their bodies) when their nappies are off.

Under three year olds do not understand that all their body parts are really 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.

They are interested in looking at their own and other children's bodies. They may play games, which involve looking and touching.

They are often interested in parents' bodies and are interested in where babies come from and how they get out of the mother's body.

Four year olds are very interested in toilet words and in what people do in bathrooms and toilets. They don't usually understand or ask about sexual intercourse.

In the early primary school years

Children usually know that looking at each other's bodies and masturbation are things people do in private.

Children often use sex words that they have heard from their friends.

By 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 masturbate a lot it may be because something is worrying them. It is important to try to work out what is the matter. Very young children can't tell you so you need to think about what could be the cause (eg new baby, starting child care), and then work out how to help them feel better.

Give children who are masturbating something else to do with their hands, such as reading a book.

Touch

Some fathers and stepfathers worry about cuddling or holding their daughters because of fears about being accused of sexual abuse.

However, touching, such as hugging, stroking and cuddling, is very important for children to feel loved and to learn to show love and affection. Touching children should be done as part of caring for the child not because adults want to do it for their own sexual pleasure.

What parents and carers can do

- Answer the questions children ask naturally, so they will learn they can talk to you about sex (and anything else) and ask you when they need to know something.
- From an early age always use the correct names for all body parts.
- 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.
- Role model behaviour that shows that you value people of both sexes.

Most parents want their children to have a healthy attitude about sex. Remember, your attitude to the opposite sex, and the way you behave, react and talk about sex, will influence how your children respond and feel about their sexuality.

Sex Play

- Childhood is a time of learning and exploration. Children explore their bodies during childhood, including the sexual parts. Normally 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 difference.
- If children are found playing sex games they are often embarrassed, especially if they learn that it is play that their parents do not approve of. If they are asked to stop and play something else they usually do, at least in the view of adults.



Most parents want their children to have a healthy attitude about sex.

If you find children playing sex games

Many things which children find confusing or frightening are caused by the way adults react. If you find children playing sex games and you are not sure how to react, take a deep breath and think first.

Think about the message you want to get across to children. You could start with something like "I see you are playing a game about your bodies, can you tell me how you thought of that game?" "There are lots of way to learn about bodies, one is by touching someone else, another is by looking in books. If you would like I will show you some books", and invite the children to come with you to find a book.

When you need help about children's sexual behaviour

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

How can I tell when a sexual behaviour is a problem?

Assess:

1. whether the type of sexual activity is normally expected for the child's developmental level;
2. whether the children involved have relatively equal power;
3. whether force or intimidation was used;
4. whether the behaviour is kept secret; and
5. whether the behaviour appears compulsive or the child is obsessed with it.

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

- knowing more about sex than what you would expect for the child's age for example preschool children knowing about or playing about sexual intercourse;
- unexplained redness or soreness or injury of the genital areas (vagina, anus (bottom), penis or mouth);
- children forcing other children to play sex games;



- children 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 a lot, or in public after kindergarten age;
- always drawing the sexual parts of bodies; and/or
- being afraid or upset when people talk about their bodies or sex.

Signs of stress such as bedwetting, soiling their pants or hurting themselves may be signs of sexual abuse but can be caused by other worries. They may reflect signs of stress and your child needs help.

- You will probably feel very upset and angry.
- You will need to talk over your feelings with a professional who can support you and help you to support your child.
- If your child knows you are very upset yourself it might make him or her feel worse about what has happened.
- Children who have been sexually abused often confuse caring touch with sexual touch or try to turn caring touch into sexual touch.
- It is important for parents to continue to show caring touch and to help the child to learn to separate this from sexual touch eg. “ I don’t like it when you touch me that way - come and I’ll give you a hug”.

It is most important that children who have been sexually abused understand that they are in no way to blame for what happened to them.

- If you have worries about a child’s sexual behaviour you can ring Parentline (in Queensland) for advice on 1300 30 1300 (8am to 10pm 7 days/week).
- If you suspect a child has been sexually abused, or a child discloses to you, do not attempt to conduct any form of interview, as it can upset the child and might make it harder for the investigating officers to know what really happened.
- To protect children from further abuse it is important to notify the Queensland Police Service or the nearest Department of Child Safety Area Office of your concerns as soon as possible.



Services for parents and children

- Parentline (8am to 10pm 7 days/week) **1300 301 300**
- Kids Help Line (24 hr) **1800 551 800**
- Community Child Health Service (24 hr) **3862 2333**
Outside Brisbane **1800 177 279**
- Child Care Information Service **3224 4225**
Outside Brisbane **1800 637 711**
- Women’s Infolink **1800 177 577**
- *dvconnect* womensline (24 hours) **1800 811 811**
Domestic violence counselling and refuge placements
- *dvconnect* mensline (10am to 6pm) **1800 600 636**
Counselling, support and information

Your local library has a range of excellent books on parenting.

Look in your local White Pages for your Queensland Health Community Child Health Service and for information about their parent education courses (Positive Parenting Program - Triple P)

Adapted from information contained in the Parent Easy Guide Series © Parenting SA, Government of South Australia 2000.

Published by the Department of Communities. For reorders phone 3224 4225 if in the Brisbane metropolitan area or 1800 637 711 if outside the metropolitan area.

Tip sheets are also available from the Department of Communities website at www.communities.qld.gov.au

