

# **Normal Child Sexual Development and Promoting Healthy Sexual Development**

## **Pre-Birth**

- Male fetus: reflexive erections in utero
- There is some evidence of auto-stimulation of genitals (this is controversial and highly contested)

## **Birth – Age 3**

### Normal Behavior

- Initial contact with others is sensory/tactile
- Primary gratification from sucking, being held, stroked, handled
- Reflexive erections common in boys
- Vaginal lubrication can occur in girls
- Orgasm is possible (documented in age 4+ months)
- Randomly grab own genitals as early infant
- Exploratory play with genitals common in boys at 6-7 months, in girls 10-11 months
- Rhythmic rocking (in bed) for genital stimulation
- Interested in and talk about eliminative/sexual body parts during toilet training
- Beginning awareness of gender identity and role differences
- Curious about male/female anatomical differences and urination postures

### Child is Learning

- That touching and physical expression of affection is good
- About differences between boys' and girls' bodies

### Appropriate Parental Roles

- Holding, hugging, tickling, caressing infant
- Expressing physical affection among family members

## **Preschool: Ages 3 – 5**

### Normal Behavior

- Child is very curious about differences between male and female bodies
- Talk about anatomical differences between males and females
- Heightened interest in bathroom/dressing activities of others
- Name calling/word games about body parts and functions
- Mutual games between children involving showing each other their body parts
- Mutual exploration of body parts between children. This can involve stroking, kissing, and touching genitals; this behavior is not usually planned, it is opportunistic
- Conscious masturbation for pleasurable feelings, usually without penetration by fingers or objects
- Asks many questions regarding urination, pregnancy, and delivery. Child may have questions regarding intercourse and conception if an older child has observed or overheard sexual behavior, or if child has seen X-rated movies. Child may have questions about breast-feeding, especially if the mother is nursing.

### Child is learning

- The difference between male and female methods of urination
- Basic gender identity, and expectations for male and female roles
- That there is a special type of emotional relationship between adults
- Child may be capable of learning that a baby begins as an egg in his/her mother's uterus and grows there until he/she is big enough to be born; that babies are delivered through the vagina, or by Cesarean Section
- Some children will learn what intercourse is. Most children do not have questions about intercourse unless an older child has told them about it, or they have observed it. Even after explanation about intercourse, most children are not able to conceptualize that the penis has two functions and thinks that the man urinates into the woman. Some children are troubled by this information, or find it too stimulating.

### Appropriate Parental Roles

- Engage the child in discussion regarding his/her questions regarding body parts, urination, pregnancy, delivery and intercourse honestly, and in concrete, simple terms. The parent should take his/her cue regarding the child's readiness for information from the question that is asked. The parent should not give the child more information than he/she asks for.

- Teach the child that dressing, going to the bathroom, and bathing should be done in private.
- Acknowledge that stimulation of the genitals is pleasurable; set limits on the child's masturbation by redirecting the behavior when it is interfering with other activities; teach the child that masturbation should occur in private.
- Teach children about appropriate and inappropriate touching; that their bodies belong to them; that he/she should not touch anyone in a private way; that he/she can say no to unwanted touching from children and adults; that children can say no to him/her; and that he/she should tell an adult if anyone touches him/her in a way that he/she doesn't like.
- Set limits regarding exploratory sex play.
- Help children use acceptable terms for body parts and functions.
- Encourage children to believe in the integrity of their own bodies.

### **School-Aged: 6 – 9**

#### Normal Behavior

- Increased focus on male/female roles
- Practice social roles through play activities; children play school, store, family, work
- Pose questions regarding pregnancy, birth intercourse
- Initiate competitive games involving urination and sexual activity such as "peeing" contests, strip poker, truth/dare, stripping for club initiation
- Interactive touching (stroking/rubbing; open-mouthed kissing, re-enacting intercourse but without penetration, and only with clothes on)
- Experimentation with sexual swearing
- Looks for nude pictures in books, magazines, catalogues
- Private masturbation
- Talks about sex with same-gender friends

#### Child is Learning

- About conception, intercourse
- About menstruation, wet dreams, sperm
- About why some babies are boys and others are girls
- About male and female roles in the adult world
- About emotional intimacy between males and females

### Appropriate Parental Roles

- Provide accurate information about intercourse and conception
- Set limits to sexual games
- Provide accurate, non-sexist information regarding roles and relationships between men and women; and men's and women's roles in the adult world
- Model emotional intimacy between men and women
- Respect child's privacy
- Teach the child that people must act responsibly regarding sexual behavior

### **Preadolescence: Ages 10 – 12**

#### Normal Behavior

- Puberty (including menstruation and wet dreams) begins for some children
- Giggling and talking about physical changes
- Child often feels awkward about physical changes in his/her body; worries that he/she is developing too slowly or too rapidly; is concerned and embarrassed about physical changes
- Focus on own body development and compares him/herself to same gender peers
- Read information about sex with avid interest
- Intense interest in viewing other's bodies
- Discreet masturbation
- Some children may begin sexual/romantic fantasies
- Boy-girl social relationships begin: flirting, hand holding, kissing, spending time together
- Boy-girl involvement with sexual exploration is with approximately same-aged peers
- Erections result from erotic as well as non-erotic stimuli

#### Child is Learning

- The mechanical and emotional aspects of adult sexuality
- That his/her body is changing
- Beginning understanding of how to behave around members of the opposite sex

### Appropriate Adult Roles

- Provide supervised situations in which groups of boys and girls can participate in joint activities (recreational, church or school affiliated)
- Teach about responsibility within relationships
- Teach about responsibility regarding sexual behavior (i.e., responsibility for the spread of STDs and AIDs and for pregnancy)
- Role model caring and responsible relationship between adults who are emotionally intimate

### **Adolescence: Age 13+**

#### Normal Behavior

- Solidification of gender identity via modeling
- Sexual joking, sexual obscenities, discuss physical attributes of specific members of the opposite sex
- Co-ed focus in social activities; dating begins
- Girls are usually attracted to boys who are slightly older; boys are usually attracted to girls who are slightly younger
- Interest in viewing bodies of opposite sex
- Discrete masturbation
- Appreciation of erotica
- May experiment with homosexual relationships and sexual activity
- Hugging, kissing, “making out”
- Mutual masturbation, simulated intercourse, foreplay
- Intercourse, within a stable dating relationship

#### Child is Learning

- The social and emotional implications of dating, choosing a mate, sexual intimacy, and sexual identity
- Appropriate flirting, courting and dating behavior
- How to set limits with others regarding his/her involvement in sexual activity
- The implications of emotional commitment in a romantic relationship

### Appropriate Parental Roles

- Parents should engage the child in open, honest discussions regarding appropriate dating behavior, emotional and sexual intimacy, sexual identity, emotional commitment
- Parents should discuss responsibilities regarding interpersonal commitment and intimacy involved in dating relationships, and regarding avoiding pregnancy, STDs, and AIDs
- Parents should teach teens not to exploit other people socially, emotionally, or sexually
- Since teens may be embarrassed to talk with their parents about the above, the parent should provide the child access to other trusted adults (church member, relatives, guidance counselors, etc.)
- Parents should set appropriate limits regarding dating (i.e., age at which dating will be allowed, curfew, etc.)
- Parents should be open to questions and values expressed by the teen

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