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AGES & STAGES

Sexual Behaviors in Young Children: What's Normal, What's Not?

It can be easy for parents to talk with their children about the differences between right and wrong, but it is often more difficult for parents to talk with their children about sexual development.

At a very young age, children begin to explore their bodies by touching, poking, pulling, and rubbing their body parts, including their genitals. As children grow older, they will need guidance in learning about these body parts and their functions.

Here's some information and tips to help parents tell the difference between "normal" sexual behaviors and behaviors that may signal a problem.



What's Normal?

Here's a list of what pediatricians say is normal, common sexual behavior in 2 through 6-year-olds. When these behaviors happen, try to redirect your child's attention to more appropriate behavior by saying something such as, *"Grown-ups do that in private, and you should, too."* Reinforce that children should respect each other, and it is not OK to touch anyone else's private parts. Also, remind your child to always tell you or another trusted grown-up if anyone ever touches his or her private parts.

- Touching/masturbating genitals in public or private
- Looking at or touching a peer's or new sibling's genitals
- Showing genitals to peers
- Standing or sitting too close to someone
- Trying to see peers or adults naked

Examples of Sexual Behaviors in Children Aged 2 Through 6 Years

Normal, common behaviors	Less common normal behaviors ^a	Uncommon behaviors in normal children ^b	Rarely normal ^c
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touching/masturbating genitals in public/private • Viewing/touching peer or new sibling genitals • Showing genitals to peers • Standing/sitting too close • Tries to view peer/adult nudity • Behaviors are transient, few, and distractible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rubbing body against others • Trying to insert tongue in mouth while kissing • Touching peer/adult genitals • Crude mimic of movements associated with sexual acts • Sexual behaviors that are occasionally, but persistently, disruptive to others • Behaviors are transient and moderately responsive to distraction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking peer/adult to engage in specific sexual act(s) • Inserting objects into genitals • Explicit imitation of intercourse • Touching animal genitals • Sexual behaviors that are frequently disruptive to others • Behaviors are persistent and resistant to parental distraction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any sexual behaviors involving children who are 4 or more years apart • A variety of sexual behaviors displayed on a daily basis • Sexual behavior that results in emotional distress or physical pain • Sexual behaviors associated with other physically aggressive behavior • Sexual behaviors that involve coercion • Behaviors are persistent and child becomes angry if distracted

- ^aAssessment of situational factors (e.g., family nudity, day care, new sibling) contributing to behavior recommended.
- ^bAssessment of situational factors, family characteristics (e.g., violence, abuse, neglect) recommended.
- ^cAssessment of all family and environmental factors and report to child protective services recommended.
- **Note:** This table was adapted from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) clinical report, *Evaluation of Sexual Behaviors in Children*, and should not be used in isolation to determine if a child has been sexually abused. Please bring up any concerns with your child's pediatrician.

Red Flag Behaviors

Parents also need to know when a child's sexual behavior appears more than harmless curiosity. Sexual behavior problems may pose a risk to the safety and well-being your child and other children and can signal physical (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/What-to-Know-about-Child-Abuse.aspx) or sexual abuse (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Sexual-Abuse.aspx) or exposure to sexual activity. Sexual behavior problems include any act that:

- Occurs frequently and cannot be redirected
- Causes emotional or physical pain or injury to themselves or others
- Is associated with physical aggression
- Involves coercion or force
- Simulates adult sexual acts

Body Safety Teaching Tips for Parents

Parents should begin to teach their children about body safety between the ages of 3 to 5.

- **Use appropriate language.** Teach children proper names for all body parts, including names such as genitals, penis, vagina, breasts, buttocks, and private parts. Making up names for body parts may give the idea that there is something bad about the proper name. Understand why your child has a special name for the body part but teach the proper name, too. Also, teach your child which parts are private (parts covered by a swimming suit).
- **Evaluate your family's respect for modesty.** While modesty isn't a concept most young children can fully grasp, you can still use this age to lay a foundation for future discussions and model good behavior. If you have children of various ages, for example, it's important to teach your younger children to give older siblings their privacy. Usually, older siblings will teach the younger ones to get their clothes on, for example, because they might have friends over or because they are maturing and feel modest even in front of their younger brothers and sisters.

- **Don't force affection.** Do not force your children to give hugs or kisses to people they do not want to. It is their right to tell even grandma or grandpa that they do not want to give them a kiss or a hug goodbye. Inappropriate touching—especially by a trusted adult—can be very confusing to a child. Constantly reinforce the idea that their body is their own, and they can protect it. It is very important that your child knows to tell you or another trusted grown-up if they have been touched. That way, your child knows it's also your job to protect them.
- **Explain what a good vs. bad touches are.** You can explain a "good touch" as a way for people to show they care for each other and help each other (i.e., hugging, holding hands, changing a baby's diaper). A "bad touch" is the kind you don't like and want it to stop right away (i.e., hitting, kicking, or touching private parts). Reassure your child that most touches are okay touches, but that they should say "NO" and need to tell you about any touches that are confusing or that scare them.
- **Give your children a solid rule.** Teach them it is NOT okay for anyone to look at or touch their private parts, or what is covered by their swimsuits. It is easier for a child to follow a rule, and they will more immediately recognize a "bad touch" if they have this guideline in mind. Reassure your children that you will listen to them, believe them, and want to keep them protected.
- **Control media exposure.** Get to know the rating systems of video games (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Video-Games-Set-Your-Own-Ratings-System.aspx>), movies (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Movie-Ratings-and-What-They-Mean.aspx>), and television (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/TV-Ratings-A-Guide-for-Parents.aspx>) shows and make use of the parental controls available through many internet, cable, and satellite providers. Providing appropriate alternatives is an important part of avoiding exposure to sexual content in the media. Be aware that children may see adult sexual behaviors in person or on screens and may not tell you that this has occurred.
- **Review this information regularly with your children.** Some good times to talk to your children about personal safety are during bath time, bedtime, and before any new situation. From child care to sports practices to dance classes, not to mention camps and after-school programs, children are meeting and interacting with many different adults and children on a daily basis.
- **Expect questions.** The questions your child asks and the answers that are appropriate to give will depend on your child's age and ability to understand. The following tips might make it easier for both of you:
 - Don't laugh or giggle, even if the question is cute. Don't react with anger. Your child shouldn't be made to feel ashamed for his or her curiosity.
 - Be brief. Don't go into a long explanation. Answer in simple terms. For example, your preschooler doesn't need to know the details of intercourse.
 - See if your child wants or needs to know more. Follow up your answers with, *"Does that answer your question?"*
 - Listen to your child's responses and reactions.
 - Be prepared to repeat yourself.

Talk to Your Child's Pediatrician

If you are currently dealing with any of these issues or have additional questions, talk to your child's pediatrician. He or she can work with you to distinguish age-appropriate and normal sexual behaviors from behaviors that are developmentally inappropriate or signal potential abuse. Asking for help simply means you want what is best for your child, and you will do whatever you can to help him or her succeed.

Additional Information & Resources:

- Potty Talk: How Parents Can Discourage the Behavior (</English/ages-stages/toddler/toilet-training/Pages/Potty-Talk.aspx>)
- How to Shape & Manage Your Young Child's Behavior (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/How-to-Shape-Manage-Young-Child-Behavior.aspx>)
- Gender Identity Development in Children (</English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Gender-Identity-and-Gender-Confusion-In-Children.aspx>)
- What to Know about Child Abuse (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/What-to-Know-about-Child-Abuse.aspx>)

- **The Evaluation of Sexual Abuse in Children**
(<http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics%3b116/2/506>) (AAP Policy Statement)

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South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault & Family Violence

5-7 year: Early school years

Age appropriate sexual behaviours

- Self touching including masturbating
- Show me yours/I'll show you mine with same age children
- Like to hear and tell age appropriate dirty jokes
- Playing mummies and daddies
- Kissing/holding hands
- Mimicking or practicing observed behaviours eg pinching a bottom

Concerning sexual behaviours

- Continually rubbing/touching own genitals in public
- Persistent use of dirty words
- Wants to play sex games with much older or younger children
- Continually wants to touch private parts of other children
- Chronic peeping behaviour

Very concerning sexual behaviours

- Touches or rubs self persistently in private or public to the exclusion of normal childhood activities
- Rubbing genitals on other people
- Forcing other children to play sexual games
- Sexual knowledge too great for age
- Talks about sex and sexual acts habitually

For further information please refer to the booklet *Age Appropriate Sexual Behaviour in Children and Young People* (</pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-in-children-and-young-people/>). Hard copies of this booklet can be obtained from SECASA on (03) 9928 8741.

[Age appropriate sexual behaviour guide \(/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/\)](/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/)

[Classify the behaviour \(/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/classify-the-behaviour/\)](/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/classify-the-behaviour/)

[0-4 years: Infant, toddler and pre-school \(/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/0-4-years-infant-toddler-and-pre-school/\)](/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/0-4-years-infant-toddler-and-pre-school/)

[5-7 year: Early school years \(/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/5-7-year-early-school-years/\)](/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/5-7-year-early-school-years/)

[8-12 years: Pre-adolescent \(/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/8-12-years-pre-adolescent/\)](/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/8-12-years-pre-adolescent/)

[13-18 years: Adolescents \(/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/13-18-years-adolescents/\)](/pages/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-guide/13-18-years-adolescents/)

Documents

[Age appropriate sexual behaviour in children and young people - order form \(/assets/Documents/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-in-children-and-young-people-order-form.pdf\)](/assets/Documents/age-appropriate-sexual-behaviour-in-children-and-young-people-order-form.pdf)

To contact your nearest Centre Against Sexual Assault in Victoria phone the Sexual Assault Crisis Line (<http://www.sacl.com.au>) on 1800 806 292 (tel:1800806292) or Australia phone 1800 737 732 (tel:1800737732)

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