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FOR CHILDREN AGES 3 TO 7

Sexuality and Your Child

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By the age of three, your child will probably begin to ask you for information about sex. It will help if you take as much care in preparing yourself for your child's sexuality education as you do when preparing to teach him or her about health and physical safety.

Knowing what to expect at different ages can help you respond to typical questions young children ask. It also helps to know what behaviors you can expect.

Three to four years

Characteristics of sexual development

- ▶ Three- and 4-year-olds are curious about where babies come from.
- ▶ They explore other children's and adults' bodies because of their curiosity. "Playing doctor" and pretending to be mommy or daddy become more common activities.
- ▶ They have increased interest in the differences between adults' and children's bodies.
- ▶ By age four, girls may become intensely attached to their fathers and boys to their mothers.



- ▶ Children begin to have a sense of modesty and can begin to understand the difference between private and public behavior.
- ▶ For many children, genital touching increases, especially when they are tired or upset.
- ▶ Three- and 4-year-olds still have a concern about elimination and frequently use words that refer to bowel movements and urination.

Five to seven years

Characteristics of sexual development

- ▶ Children in this age group begin to have more contacts outside the family. Other children may bring up new ideas about sex.
- ▶ They have increased need for privacy while bathing and dressing.
- ▶ Five- to 7-year-olds often increase their use of sexual or "obscene" language (frequently to test parental reaction).
- ▶ They are more interested in what it means to be male or female.
- ▶ They give up wanting to "marry" mom or dad. Girls become closer to their mothers and boys to their fathers.
- ▶ Children in this age group become more reticent about asking questions.
- ▶ Masturbation continues to be common. Tell your child that this is not wrong, but it is something one does in private.

Parental concerns and questions

Q. What if my child masturbates?

Masturbation is normal, and most children fondle their genitals. Don't make your child feel guilty about being interested in his or her own body. However, by age four, a parent can help a child understand that this is a private behavior — "It's OK in your room, but not in the grocery store."

Q. I found my child playing doctor with her friends. What should I do?

Because all children are curious, most children play "hospital" and "doctor." This can be a good opportunity to say to your child, "I know you are wondering about each others' bodies. Let's talk about what you want to know." It is also a good opportunity to say, "Your body belongs to you. You can tell someone, 'No,' if you don't want to be touched."

You also need to be aware of safety issues. Children may insert pencils, sticks or other objects in body openings and cause injury. Although it is normal for children of the same ages to engage in this exploratory play, there is cause for concern if one or more of the children is older.

Q. My 4-year-old son likes to dress up in girls' clothes and play house. Will this lead to homosexuality?

No. This type of play is a way that children learn about the adult world. Preschool children actively try out many roles.

Q. My child frequently uses obscene words. How should I handle this?

You may want to check the child's knowledge about what the word means. Children often use a word without knowing what it means. When you explain what the word means, they often don't want to use it. Teach your child words that are OK to use when he or she feels angry or frustrated.

Many parents wish to discourage the use of obscenities. Talk about what the words mean with your child, and explain that these words may bother others.

Q. What about sex on television?

Many parents are concerned about how television portrays sexual issues and sexual behavior. Almost all programs and commercials convey sexual messages — on sex roles, body image, how emotion is expressed, the meaning of marriage and family, and how people communicate about sexuality.

You can use television to strengthen your communication with your child. Watch TV with your child and use the programs as a springboard for discussion. Use these opportunities to discuss sexuality and family values.

In addition, limit television viewing to programs you feel are appropriate for your child.

Q. Where do babies come from?

For younger children, use a simple answer such as, "Babies come from inside the mother. They grow in a special place called the uterus."

By age 5, children become intensely interested in where babies come from, and you may need to give a more detailed explanation. If your child is interested, you could describe intercourse and conception in simple terms.

Be an "askable" parent — Let your children know they can come to you with questions

Starting early with sexuality education can help you communicate with your child now and during the teen years. Some guidelines to help you become an "askable" parent are:

- ▶ Let your child know he or she can come to you for information.
- ▶ Be willing to repeat information until your child understands.
- ▶ Check out what your child already knows by asking what he or she thinks.
- ▶ Keep your answers simple. Think about what your child can and can't understand.
- ▶ Realize it's OK to say, "I don't know." There are many good books for you and your child to read together.
- ▶ Relax. You want to help your child understand that sexuality is a valuable part of human experience. Review the facts of reproduction if you need to.
- ▶ Have a sense of humor and make this learning experience fun for you and your child.

To become more comfortable talking about sex with your child, practice first. "Discuss" a topic with yourself in the bathroom mirror, talk with a friend or role-play with your partner, switching roles of child and parent.

For further information on sexuality, see the attached book list. Remember, you don't need to know all the answers, but you do want to be an askable parent. You want your child to come to you with questions about sexuality rather than seeking answers from friends or television.

Choose books carefully

When selecting a book on sexuality for your child, it is important that you read it first. A book may be more explicit than you thought, or you may find you need time to practice reading it aloud. Look for books that:

- ▶ Are written so that your child can understand it.
- ▶ Treat men and women equally rather than placing them in stereotypical roles.

Consider the author's background. For example, a minister may write from his or her religious perspective. A physician may focus on the physical aspect of sexuality rather than moral or emotional views.

Libraries are often good sources for borrowing books. If your library does not have a title, they may be able to obtain it through an inter-library loan.

Additional reading

Books for parents

- Calderone, Mary and Eric W. Johnson, 1983. *The Family Book About Sexuality*. New York: Bantam.
- Calderone, Mary and James W. Ramey, 1983. *Talking With Your Child About Sex*. New York: Random House.
- Gordon, Sol and Judith Gordon, 1983. *Raising A Child in a Sexually Permissive World*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Ratner, Marilyn and Susan Chamlin, 1987. *Straight Talk: Sexuality Education for Parents and Kids, 4-7*. New York: Penguin.
- How to Talk to Your Children About AIDS*, 1994. Siecus: New York, N.Y.
- How to Talk to Children About Sex*, 1995. The Bureau for At Risk Youth, Huntington, N.Y.
- Oh No! What Do I Do Now? Messages About Sexuality: How to Give Yours to Your Child*, 1983. Siecus: New York, N.Y.

Books for parents and children

- Gordon, Sol and Judith Gordon, 1982. *Did the Sun Shine Before You Were Born?* Fayetteville, New York: Ed-U Press.
- Green, David, 1982. *Sex on TV: A Guide for Parents*. Santa Cruz, CA: Network Publications.
- Baby Basics: Children's Activities in How Life Begins*, 1995. Santa Cruz, CA: Network Publications.
- Facts and Feelings, Helping Families Talk About Sexuality*, 1990. Utah State University: Logan, Utah.



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