

Normative Sexual Development

Sexual Development is the process of changes in physical growth, sexual knowledge, and sexual beliefs youth come to learn and display through their behavior. Research shows when adults have knowledge about sexual development, these topics are easier to discuss. Culture and life experiences can have an effect on the way adults approach conversations about sexual development.

Remember:

- It's natural for children to have curiosity about sexual behavior, their bodies and others' bodies, and to show interest in sexual activities.
- Healthy sexual play is exploratory and spontaneous. It occurs by mutual agreement between children of similar age, size, or developmental level.
- Awareness and proactive dialogue can help youth learn appropriate boundaries for sexual play and behavior.
- Culture plays a role in how sexual development is perceived, discussed, and modeled in each family unit.
- A trusted adult can be a parent, caregiver, or other family member.

Responding Throughout Development

Take a moment

Sexuality can be a taboo or uncomfortable topic which can lead to strong reactions. It is always ok for trusted adults to take a moment to collect their thoughts and find a calm headspace. This will lead to more successful conversations.

Consider saying: "I'm going to take a few minutes to myself, but I would like to have a conversation about this together."

Validate curiosity

Children are learning about their world. Create opportunities for conversations and provide guidance on safe ways to explore, especially for older youth who are building their decision-making skills.

Consider using plural language: plural language like "for some.." or ask for clarification like "so it seems like" when validating.

Ask questions without shame or judgement

Engaging with children and youth on this topic is important. Avoid the temptation to stay silent, ignore the behavior, or respond with judgement. Remember not to make assumptions about identities and preferences.

Consider asking: "What were you doing?" "How did you get the idea?" "How did you learn about this?" "How did you feel about doing it?"

Gather resources

Trusted adults do not need to be experts on sexuality. Create a toolbox of developmentally appropriate resources that reinforce a sex-positive message with accurate information. Sharing these resources and the process of finding them can also model media literacy for children and youth.

Offer to look up accurate information together: "So it appears you are curious about [insert topic]. How about we look up the information about that together?"

Connect and plan with other trusted adults

It is important to have opportunities to process feelings around these conversations with other adults. A network of trusted adults can also help to develop group safety plans, monitor sexual behaviors, establish clear expectations, and implement strategies to support children's development across families. Remember to respect each child's privacy. Seeking their consent before sharing in the adult group reinforces the safety of conversations between a trusted adult and child/youth.

Sexual Development and the Caregiver Response

Ages birth to 3 years old

Sexual Development is the process of changes in physical growth, sexual knowledge, and sexual beliefs youth come to learn and display through their behavior. Children birth to 3 years old are curious, lack inhibition, and explore the world through observations and their primary senses.

Sex-positive approach: Support this curiosity without shaming to help children develop a healthy relationship with their bodies.



Knowledge

- Understands appropriate names for body parts and that bodies are a source of pleasure.
- Asks questions and shows curiosity related to bodies and bodily functions.
- Learns social norms and differences in bodies through observation.

Behavior

- Removes clothing and enjoys being naked.
- Explores genitals or rubs genitals against objects for pleasure or soothing (in private and in public).
- Interested in and may explore other's bodies.
- Talks and laughs to same age children about bodily functioning and slang words.

Caregiver Support

- Use accurate words for body parts.
 - Instead of “we-we” use “genitals,” “penis,” “vulva,” etc.
- Talk about safety and body boundaries.
 - Instead of “good/bad” touch, use “safe/unsafe” touch or “thumbs up/thumbs down” touch.
- Model consent and body boundaries to avoid forcing affection with others.
 - Instead of “Give them a [hug, kiss, etc.]” ask “Would you like a hug, wave, or a high-five?” or “Do you want to give them a hug?”
- Explore and share developmentally appropriate books on consent, bodies, gender, etc.

Sexual Development and the Caregiver Response

Ages 4 to 8 years old

Sexual Development is the process of changes in physical growth, sexual knowledge, and sexual beliefs youth come to learn and display through their behavior. Children 4-8 years old use developing verbal skills to communicate their curiosities while deepening their understanding of social norms.



Sex-positive approach: Support the development of boundaries and provide opportunities to answer questions and share observations.

Knowledge

- Understands the differences in bodies and gender norms and roles.
- Understands the concept of privacy related to bodies.
- Aware that bodies are a source for purposeful pleasure.
- Asks questions and shows curiosity about bodies, childbirth, relationships, gender, etc.

Behavior

- Explores genitals or masturbates for pleasure.
- Attempts to see and explore other same age or same sex children's body parts ("playing doctor").
- Role plays relationship or dating behaviors ("playing house").
- Uses technology to seek answers to curiosity.

Caregiver Support

- Respond to curiosity, questions, and connection with their body without judgment or shame.
- Instead of "Stop That!" or "We'll talk about this when you're old enough," validate their curiosity by saying "I see that you are curious about bodies."
- Clarify appropriate boundaries (in private, at home, in public).
- Continue discussing consent and body boundaries, especially related to other youth.
- Help identify trusted adults in their safety and support network.
- Build media literacy skills by modeling how to find information and answers to questions.
- Continue exploring developmentally appropriate books and resources on consent, bodies, gender, sexual identity, and safety.

Sexual Development and the Caregiver Response

Ages 9 to 12 years old

Sexual Development is the process of changes in physical growth, sexual knowledge, and sexual beliefs youth come to learn and display through their behavior. Children 9-12 years old understand more complex topics related to sexuality and puberty. They are also exploring their own identities while navigating societal expectations.

Sex-positive approach: Create opportunities for conversations on sex and sexual behaviors. Listen without judgement or shaming.



Knowledge

- Understands more complex ideas related to bodies, masturbation, puberty, gender, and intercourse.
- Understands the concept of privacy related to bodies and sexual behaviors.
- Aware of the stigma of sexuality and certain sexual behaviors.
- Asks questions related to bodies, puberty, relationships, sex, and gender.

Behavior

- Desires privacy and explores genitals or masturbation.
- Develops new attractions and relationships with peers via online platforms (social media, online games).
- Engages with peers in ways that involve sexual behaviors and may mimic relationships ("truth or dare").
- Pursues curiosity through nudity of others or sexual material.

Caregiver Support

- Be a mentor while modelling and honoring consent, body boundaries, privacy, and decision-making.
- Discuss reproduction, STIs (safe sex practices and where to get help) as well as pleasure, consent, and identity.
- Help identify trusted adults in their safety network and keep an open communication with other caregivers in their life.
- Build media literacy and provide developmentally appropriate books and resources on consent, bodies, gender, sexual identity, and safety.

Sexual Development and the Caregiver Response

Ages 13 to 18 years old

Sexual Development is the process of changes in physical growth, sexual knowledge, and sexual beliefs youth come to learn and display through their behavior. Youth 13-18 years old are able to use decision making skills to engage in sexual experiences and explore new types of relationships.



Sex-positive approach: Mentor youth by sharing appropriate stories and providing guidance on safe sex practices, consent, and boundaries.

Knowledge

- Understands and may desire agency in decisions related to bodies, masturbation, puberty, gender, and intercourse.
- Understands the concept of privacy related to bodies and sexual behaviors.
- Aware of the stigma of sexuality and certain sexual behaviors.
- Asks questions about the complexities and consequences of sex, intimacy, pleasure, and relationships.

Behavior

- May have first sexual experience, sexual experimentation, or may have no interest in intimate, romantic, or sexual relationships.
- Masturbates in private.
- Continues exploring new attractions and relationships with peers via types of online platforms (social media, online games).
- Continues pursuing interests through nudity of others and sexual material.

Caregiver Support

- Promote skills for accessing sexual healthcare and contraception options.
- Continue discussing a variety of sex topics, including sexual communication and sexual decision-making.
- Disclose developmentally appropriate relatable stories to strengthen your connection.
- Continue to be a resource for media literacy and materials on consent, bodies, gender, sexual identity, and safety.
- Discuss and provide guidance on healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships.

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Sexpositivefamilies.com