

Sexual development of children

What parents can do

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.

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 naturally does not mean the same as it does for adults. For children it is about being curious about their bodies and about the differences between the sexes.

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.

If you find children playing sex games (What should you do?)

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 is 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.

How to talk to your child about sex

- When your child asks a question, answer it, even if the answer is "Good question. We can talk about that later." (Don't forget to talk about it.)
- Answer the question in words he can understand at his age. For example, if a 4 year old asks, "Where do babies come from?" a good answer would be "Babies are made by a mother and father and grow in the mother's body in a place called the uterus."

- Find out what he really wants to know before you answer. If he asks where he came from, perhaps he wants to know where babies grow. Ask him what he thinks. He may think that babies grow in the mother's tummy. You can give the right words and tell the child he grew in the mother's uterus. Maybe his friend came from Windsor and he just wants to know if he came from Windsor!!
- Find a time and a place that is comfortable for talking about sex. It could be while you are taking a walk or at bedtime.
- Use proper words for body parts, right from birth, eg. penis, breast, vulva.
- Take time to answer your child's questions about sex. Make answers accurate, honest, short and simple.
- Let your child know when you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. It's ok.
- Be positive. Let your child know you are glad he came to you with his questions.
- Let the child know when you don't know the answer.
- Find a book on the topic of your child's questions and read the book with your child.

By age four, your child is able to learn the following:

- the name of all parts of the body, including the genitals;
 - words that are socially acceptable (like 'go to the washroom' instead of 'make pee pee');
 - that babies grow in a special place in a woman's body; and
 - that babies are made by fathers and mothers
- Keep it simple, and give the facts. Giving young children correct information is easier than getting them to unlearn the fairy tales we sometimes tell them out of embarrassment.

Books

- ***The Bare Naked Book*** by Kathy Stinson; Annick Press, Toronto, 1999.
This is a light-hearted book suitable for preschoolers. Using family-oriented pictures, it names all our external body parts.
- ***See How You Grow*** by Dr. Patricia Pearse; Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1988.
This is an excellent lift-the-flap book with clear illustrations.
- ***See How You Grow*** by Dr. Patricia Pearse; Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1988.
This is an excellent lift-the-flap book with clear illustrations.
- ***My Body is Private*** by L. Walvoord Girard; Albert Whitman & Company, 1984.
A young girl talks about what 'private' means. Most of the time we like to be touched, but if it doesn't feel good, "you can say no".
- ***Everybody has a Bellybutton*** by Laurence Pringle, 1997.
A factual look at fetal development, using illustrations. Terminology will be more easily understood by older children.
- ***How Was I Born?*** by Lennart Nilsson and Lena Katerina Swanberg; Dell Publishing, 1996.
Includes photographs of fetal development, and differences between boys and girls. Alternate texts for younger or older children.

