

Children's Sexual Behaviour: What's Normal and What's Not?



Highlights

It's normal and healthy for children to show age-appropriate interest in sex and to express sexual behaviours.

Masturbation is a healthy part of development.

Comfortable reactions and good communication help your child develop positive attitudes about sexuality and reduce the likelihood of shame.

Certain overtly sexual behaviours may suggest that a child has been exposed to adult sexual situations or possible sexual abuse.

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Understanding Normal Sexual Development

Sexuality is a natural part of being a whole person, and curiosity about sexual identity is part of your child's healthy development.

It's normal for children to engage in sexual behaviour appropriate for their age, such as:

Masturbation

Curiosity about their own and other people's bodies

Asking about sexuality

Babies may start exploring their bodies from only a few weeks old, and masturbation typically begins in infancy.

Parents may feel uncomfortable about this behaviour, but it's important to understand that babies don't feel shame or guilt about their bodies. These feelings are learned from adults' verbal and non-verbal messages.

Young children are also curious about bodies, including those of the opposite sex. When children ask questions and learn body part names, it's important to teach them the correct terms.

Healthy Sexual Behaviours in Children

Masturbation is a healthy part of child development. When young children engage in masturbation, it's important to handle it calmly, ensuring they don't feel ashamed or guilty.

As your child grows, help them understand that while masturbation is normal, it's best to do it in private.

Many children explore sexual behaviours at some point during childhood. These behaviours are typically driven by curiosity and experimentation.

Sexual behaviours considered normal for children include interactions between children of similar age that are:

Spontaneous

Non-coercive \ (one child isn't forcing or persuading another\)

Not distressing

Infrequent

An example of this might be a game like "You show me yours, and I'll show you mine" between children of the same age.

Children can usually be easily redirected to other play without feeling ashamed or guilty when limits are clearly explained.

When Sexual Behaviour Becomes Concerning

Problematic sexual behaviours may include:

Persistent \ (ongoing\) behaviour

Targeting a more vulnerable child

Distressing others

Continuing even after intervention by parents or adults

Sexual behaviours that are inappropriate for the child's age or developmental stage are also considered problematic.

If you're concerned, consult a child health nurse, doctor, or paediatrician.

Encouraging Positive Sexual Attitudes

All children enjoy their bodies and feel positive about them. Adult attitudes toward sexuality are conveyed to children through:

What you say and do

How you say and do it

What you don't say or do

It's crucial to maintain open and positive communication with your child about sexuality. Start this early to ensure continued dialogue as they grow into their teenage years.

Try to:

Find out what your child knows

Answer any questions calmly with factual information

Correct any misinformation

Comfortable communication about sexuality helps children form positive attitudes, reducing the chances of feeling shame.

Warning Signs of Sexual Abuse

Overtly sexual behaviours may indicate exposure to adult sexual situations or possible sexual abuse. Signs to watch for include:

Playing with toys or other children in inappropriate ways

Showing sexual knowledge beyond their age

Persisting with sexual themes in play or art

Hinting at sexual activity through comments or actions

Masturbating more than appropriate for their developmental stage

Bedwetting again after it had stopped

If your child exhibits any of these signs, consult a child health nurse, doctor, or paediatrician.

Always seek professional advice if you suspect sexual abuse.

Tools And Assistance

If you're concerned about your child's sexual behaviours, speak with a child health nurse, doctor, or paediatrician.

For ongoing support and guidance, consider connecting with a child psychologist or counsellor with experience in child development and sexual health.