

Healthy Sexual Development

Ages Zero to Two

During this stage, teach correct names of body parts, and using non-shaming language to foster a positive view of the human body.

Common Behaviors
Boys have erections during diaper changes
Explores genitals, like other parts of their body, because it feels good (self-soothing)
Likes being naked
Likes to be held and caressed
Learns about love and trust from care givers
Develops a positive or negative body image

Considerations for Adults	Examples of Responses
Teach children the correct names of body parts (i.e. penis, vagina). This can be done while teaching the names of other parts of the body and doesn't have to feel awkward.	<i>This is your elbow. This is your nose. This is your vagina. These are your toes.</i>
During this stage, children begin to develop a sense of self. It is important to meet their emotions and questions with understanding, acceptance, and respect.	<i>I can see that you want to put your shoes on but the laces are still tied. You look frustrated. Would you like some help?</i>
This is also a time when children develop trust. It is important to not coerce children to give displays of affection they don't want to give (i.e. Give Aunt Susie a hug.) This can be difficult and may feel like you will hurt a relative or friend's feelings, but you are allowing your child to set their personal boundaries and that is a good step in development.	<i>Sometimes we like touching and sometimes we don't. Touching is never a secret.</i> <i>It looks like Sam doesn't want a hug. Sam, would you like to give a high five or a wave instead?</i>

Healthy Sexual Development

Ages Two to Four

During this stage, consider providing basic information about reproduction, teaching children about boundaries, and encouraging a basic understanding of privacy.

Common Behaviors

Begins to understand gender identity; plays house; pretends to be opposite gender

Toilet training; want to watch others use the bathroom

Talks about bodily functions and asks questions

Shows private parts to others and tries to touch private parts of those close to them

Likes being naked and tries to see others naked; Undresses dolls to see their private parts

Self-soothing (masturbation) for comfort or rocking against something in public

Considerations for Adults

Examples of Responses

Children at this age are very curious and may ask questions about bodies and reproduction. Respond to their questions in age-appropriate, accurate and non-shaming ways.

People have many body parts that are the same and some that are different. Some people have a penis and other people have a vagina. Our bodies are good and special and deserve respect.

If children's curiosity makes you embarrassed or confused, take a deep breath. If you still feel uncomfortable, it can be helpful to practice responding in non-shaming ways in front of a mirror or with a partner or friend.

That's a great question. Thank you for asking me. I want to think about that for a little bit before I answer. I am going to think about what you asked and we can talk about it later before you go to bed.

Children at this stage start to learn that they have the right to have boundaries and that others have the same right. For adults, it is important to make sure that children's boundaries are respected. This means that adults should ask for permission before giving children hugs, kisses etc. and that they should respect when children do not want touch.

Sometimes we like touch and sometimes we don't. Touching is never a secret.

It looks like Sam might not want a hug right now. Maybe he could give a high five or a wave.

Healthy Sexual Development

Ages Four to Six

During this stage, provide basic information about reproduction, teaching about boundaries, and understanding of privacy.

Common Behaviors
Continues self-soothing and starts to understand that it should be done in private
Asks questions about sexuality or reproduction
Starts to want privacy when dressing or using bathroom
Talks to other children or adults about bodily functions and shows curiosity about adult bodies; uses 'naughty' words they might not understand
Plays 'House' and 'Doctor'; mimic adults by kissing or holding hands

Considerations for Adults	Examples of Responses
Children at this stage will ask questions about reproduction like, "Where do babies come from?" Use age appropriate language to explain the basics. This will meet their need for information, without giving too much detail.	<i>Babies grow in a special place called a uterus. They start out as a very small egg. The baby grows in the uterus until it is ready to come out.</i>
Continue to encourage and respect privacy. This may be hard in larger households where privacy is not a given. Remember that self-soothing is common and that children at this age can begin to understand the difference between public and private.	<i>Touching our penis/vagina is something that we do in private, not in public. Public places are where everyone can be, like our living room and kitchen. Private places are where other people need to ask for permission, like the bathroom and your bedroom.</i>
Teach children about boundaries. Let children know their bodies belong to them and they can say no to unwanted touch. Don't force children to have physical contact with others if it makes the child uncomfortable (i.e. kissing a relative.) Encourage children to respect the boundaries of others, as well.	<i>Sometimes we like touch and sometimes we don't. Touching is never a secret.</i> <i>We don't touch someone who says 'no touching'.</i>

Healthy Sexual Development

Ages Six to Eight

During this stage, discuss the physical changes that occur during puberty, reinforce concepts of privacy, and basics of reproduction.

Common Behaviors
Compares body parts to peer-age friends; Strong same-sex friendships
Talks about having a boyfriend or girlfriend
Self-touching for the purpose of pleasure
Deeper understanding of gender roles (conform or rebel)
Plays games with same-aged peers related to sexuality (Dare)
Talks about or tells jokes related to body parts or functions with friends; uses slang words
Draws genitals on human figures when they are portrayed nude

Considerations for Adults	Examples of Responses
It is normal for children to experience puberty at different rates and ages. Children often have a lot of questions about puberty but do not feel comfortable asking them. Use non-shaming language to explain what can be expected during puberty. If you get stuck on what to say, there are several great books on puberty.	<i>Every person is different and puberty starts at different ages for different kids. During puberty, there are changes that happen to your body. Puberty also brings about a lot of feelings. It's normal to feel excited, scared, confused or a mixture of all of those things. If you ever want to talk to me or ask any questions, I am here to talk.</i>
Share your values related to sexuality. Talk about different sexual orientations and promote a supportive understanding of how children experience gender identity.	<i>Everyone has the right to have their bodies, feelings, and ways of expressing themselves respected. It is important to respect other people's bodies, feelings, and ways of expressing themselves.</i>
Children begin to talk about "sex" on the playground during this stage. It is important to continue talks about sexual reproduction and address any myths the child has encountered. Discourage the use of derogatory or inappropriate terms they may have heard.	<i>I heard some people at your school using the word 'slut' today. When I heard that, it made me uncomfortable. That word is used as a put down, usually when talking about girls/women. It is not a respectful or nice word.</i>

Healthy Sexual Development

Ages Eight to Twelve

During this stage, continue discussions about the changes that occur during puberty, reinforce that everyone has the right to refuse touch from anyone at any time, and the need to respect that right in others.

Common Behaviors

- Looks to peers, media, & sources for sexuality information; Peers are very important
- May talk about sex with friends, seek out pictures, stories
- Feels anxious and curious about puberty
- Compares self to same-sex peers in physical development and sexual knowledge
- May feel shy asking questions about sex to caregivers or may act like they know it all
- Sexual attraction for children of the same and/or opposite gender may begin
- Sexual orientation and gender identity is usually known by this stage, or suspected
- Rapid mood swings are normal
- Begins to develop an emerging sense of self as a young adult

Considerations for Adults

Examples of Responses

Children continue to develop boundaries and discussions around consent are very important. Children need to know they have the right to say "no" to anyone touching their bodies, and they need to respect that right in others. This concept can be incorporated not only in talk about sex, but also is talks about respecting their friends when someone asks them to stop doing something (i.e. tickling or touching.)

Everyone has the right to have their boundaries respected. Everyone has the responsibility to respect other people's boundaries. It is important to listen to what someone is saying and look at what their body language is telling us so that we can be sure not to cross their boundaries.

Continue to use non-shaming language to discuss puberty, masturbation, and privacy. Puberty and masturbation are normal stages of development and can be difficult to talk about, but children are talking to their peers about these issues, and you want information coming from you or another adult.

Have regular check ins or conversations about puberty, sexuality, and/or related topics.

Healthy Sexual Development

Ages Thirteen and Older

During this stage, continue discussions about physical development, sexuality, respect, boundaries, and consent.

Common Behaviors
Looks to peers, media, & sources for sexuality information; Peers remain very important
May be considering or engaging in behaviors that are sexual in nature with peers
May talk about sex with friends, seek out pictures, stories
Feels anxious and curious about sex
Compares self to peers in terms of physical development and sexual knowledge
May feel shy asking questions about sex or may act like they already know all answers
Sexual attraction for peers of the same and/or opposite gender may increase
Sexual orientation and gender identity is usually known by this stage, or suspected
Rapid mood swings are normal
Developmentally driven to seek adult autonomy/independence

Considerations for Adults	Examples of Responses
Youth continue to develop boundaries and discussions around consent, identity, and responsibilities are very important. Youth need to know they have the right to say “no” to anyone touching their bodies, and they need to respect that right in others. It is important to help youth understand when and how consent is given.	<p><i>Everyone has the right to have their boundaries respected.</i></p> <p><i>Everyone has the responsibility to respect other people’s boundaries.</i></p>
Continue to use non-shaming language to discuss puberty, identity, masturbation, sex, and privacy. Puberty and masturbation are normal stages of development and can be difficult to talk about, but youth are talking to their peers about these issues, and you want information coming from you or another adult.	<p><i>Have regular check ins or conversations about puberty, sexuality, and/or related topics.</i></p>