

Sexual Behaviors in Young Children: What's Normal, What's Not?

As a parent, you may be perfectly comfortable talking with your child about the differences between right and wrong. But talking with them about their private parts and sexual development is not always so easy.

Seeing what may appear to be "sexual" behaviors in your young child may be especially distressing. You may worry that these behaviors are odd, deviant or a sign of sexual victimization.



In fact, "sexual" behaviors in children are common, especially between about 3 to 6 years old. Usually, they are a normal part of development. Read on for information that can help you tell the difference between normal "sexual" behaviors and behaviors that may signal a problem.

Children's natural curiosity about their bodies

At a very young age, children begin to explore their bodies. They may touch, poke, pull or rub their body parts, including their genitals. It is important to keep in mind that these behaviors are not sexually motivated. They typically are driven by curiosity and attempts at self-soothing.

Curiosity about bodies, and their differences, can also prompt children to try to look at others in states of undress, rub up against them and ask questions about genitals and toileting.

As children grow older, they will need guidance in learning about their body parts, their functions and appropriate social boundaries that surround them.

Normal sexual behaviors in toddlers and preschoolers

Normative (normal), common "sexual" behavior in 2- to 6-year-olds may include:

- Touching/rubbing genitals in public or private
- Looking at or touching a peer's or sibling's genitals
- Showing genitals to peers
- Standing or sitting too close to someone
- Trying to see peers or adults naked

Examples of Sexual Behaviors in Children Aged 2 Through 6 Years			
Common, normal behaviors	Less common normal behaviors	Uncommon behaviors in normal children	Rarely normal

Touching/masturbating genitals in public or private	Rubbing body against others	Asking a peer or adult to engage in specific sexual act(s)	Any sexual behaviors involving children who are 4 or more years apart
Viewing or touching peer or a new sibling's genitals	Trying to insert tongue in mouth while kissing	Inserting objects into genitals	A variety of sexual behaviors displayed on a daily basis
Showing genitals to peers	Touching a peer's or an adult's genitals	Explicit imitation of sexual intercourse	Sexual behavior that results in emotional distress or physical pain
Standing/sitting too close	Crude mimic of movements associated with sexual acts	Touching animal genitals	Sexual behaviors associated with other physically aggressive behavior
Tries to view peers or adults nude	Sexual behaviors that are occasional but persistent and disruptive to others	Sexual behaviors that are frequently disruptive to others	Sexual behaviors that involve coercion
Behaviors are transient, not very frequent and can be easily diverted	Behaviors are transient and moderately responsive to distraction	Behaviors that persist and are resistant to parental distraction	Behaviors are persistent and child becomes angry if distracted

Is a child's self-stimulation a sign sexual abuse?

Caregivers often assume that self-stimulatory behavior such as masturbation must have been taught, suggesting that the child was sexually abused. This is not the case. Children simply find their genitals, recognize that stimulating them feels good and continue to engage in the behavior.

What to do when these behaviors happen

In general, a young child's "sexual" behaviors that are easily redirected and do not cause harm or distress are not a cause for concern. When these behaviors happen, it is important to stay calm and not become angry or upset. Instead, try to redirect your child's attention. You might say something like, "It's OK for you to touch your own body but you should do that in a private place."

This is also a good time to discuss body safety and respecting each other. (See *"Teaching body safety & boundaries: 10 tips for parents,"* below.)

Sexual behavior problems: red flags

Parents also need to know when a child's sexual behavior may be more than harmless curiosity and should be addressed by a professional. Sexual behavior problems may pose a risk to the safety and well-being of your child and other children. They also can signal an underlying neuropsychiatric disorder, physical (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/What-to-Know-about-Child-Abuse.aspx) or sexual abuse (/English/safety-prevention/at-

¹ /Pages/Sexual-Abuse.aspx) or exposure to sexual content.

Sexual behavior problems in young children include any act that:

[Back to Top](#)

- Is disruptive (they cannot focus on a task due to the behavior)
- Occurs to the exclusion of other activities and cannot be redirected
- Causes emotional or physical pain or injury to themselves or others
- Is associated with physical aggression
- Involves coercion or force
- Simulates penetrative and/or adult sexual acts

Teaching body safety & boundaries: 10 tips for parents

You can start to teach your child about body boundaries and safety as soon as they can talk. Here are some tips that can help:

- **Use appropriate language.** Teach children proper names for all body parts, including their genitals: penis, vagina, breasts and buttocks. Making up names for body parts may give the impression that they are bad or a secret and cannot be talked about. Also, teach your child which parts are "private," those usually covered by a swim suit, and should not be looked at or touched without their permission.
- **Evaluate your family's respect for modesty.** Modesty isn't a concept most young children can fully grasp. But you can still lay a foundation for future discussions and model good social boundaries. If you have kids of various ages, for example, teach your younger children to give older siblings their privacy if they request it.
- **Don't force affection.** Do not force or guilt your children to give hugs or kisses. It is OK for them to tell even grandma or grandpa that they do not want to give them a kiss or a hug goodbye. Teach your child alternate ways to show affection and respect without close physical touch (high-fives, thumbs up, etc.) Reinforce that their body is theirs to control, a concept called body autonomy.
- **Explain OK vs. not-OK touches.** An "OK touch" is a way for people to show they care for and help each other—like when caregivers help with bathing or toileting, or when doctors check to make sure their body is healthy. Reassure your child that most touches are OK touches. A "not OK touch" is one they don't like, hurts them, makes them feel uncomfortable, confused, scared or one that has anything to do with private parts.
- **Reinforce that people should respect each other.** Discuss how it is never OK for anyone to look at or touch their private parts without their permission. At the same time, they should not look at or touch other people's bodies without their permission.
- **Give your children a solid rule about inappropriate touches.** It is easy for a child to understand the concept of a rule. This will make it easier for them to recognize a not-OK touch if one happens and say "NO" to these.
- **Remind your child to always tell you or another trusted grown-up** if anyone ever touches their private parts or makes them feel uncomfortable. Inappropriate touching—especially by a trusted adult—can be very confusing to a child. Reassure your children that you will listen to and believe them if they tell you about not-OK touches.
- **Control media exposure.** Make a family media plan (</english/fmp/pages/mediaplan.aspx>). Get to know the rating systems of video games (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Video-Games-Set-Your-Own-Ratings-System.aspx>), movies (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Movie-Ratings-and-What-They-Mean.aspx>), and television (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/TV-Ratings-A-Guide-for-Parents.aspx>) shows and make use of parental controls available through many cellular, internet, cable and satellite providers. Providing appropriate alternatives is an important part of avoiding exposure to sexual content in the media. Be aware that children may see adult sexual behaviors in person or on screens and may not tell you that this has occurred.

- **Review this information regularly with your children.** Some good times to talk to your children about personal safety are during bath time, bedtime, doctor visits and before any new situation. Children meet and interact with many different adults and children every day—at child care, sports (</English/healthy-living/sports/Pages/Preventing-Abuse-in-Youth-Sports-and-Organized-Activities.aspx>) practices, dance classes, camps and after-school programs, to name a few. Giving them tools to recognize and respond to uncomfortable situations is key.
- **Expect questions.** The questions (</English/ages-stages/preschool/Pages/Talking-to-Your-Young-Child-About-Sex.aspx>) your child asks and the answers that are appropriate to give will depend on your child's age and ability to understand. It is always important to tell the truth. See *"When & How to Talk With Your Child About Sex"* for tips that can make it easier for both of you.

Talk with your child's pediatrician

If you are dealing with any of these issues or have more questions, don't hesitate to talk with your child's pediatrician. They can work with you to distinguish age-appropriate "normal" "sexual" behaviors from behaviors that are developmentally inappropriate or signal potential sexual behavior problems. Asking for help simply means you want what is best for your child, and you will do whatever you can to help them succeed.

More information

- [When & How to Talk With Your Child About Sex \(/English/ages-stages/preschool/Pages/Talking-to-Your-Young-Child-About-Sex.aspx\)](/English/ages-stages/preschool/Pages/Talking-to-Your-Young-Child-About-Sex.aspx)
- [How to Shape & Manage Your Young Child's Behavior \(/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/How-to-Shape-Manage-Young-Child-Behavior.aspx\)](/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/How-to-Shape-Manage-Young-Child-Behavior.aspx)
- [Gender Identity Development in Children \(/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Gender-Identity-and-Gender-Confusion-In-Children.aspx\)](/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Gender-Identity-and-Gender-Confusion-In-Children.aspx)
- [Social Development in Preschoolers \(/English/ages-stages/preschool/Pages/Social-Development-in-Preschoolers.aspx\)](/English/ages-stages/preschool/Pages/Social-Development-in-Preschoolers.aspx)
- [Preventing Sexual Abuse: What Parents Need to Know \(/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Sexual-Abuse.aspx\)](/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Sexual-Abuse.aspx)
- [Child Abuse and Neglect \(/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/What-to-Know-about-Child-Abuse.aspx\)](/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/What-to-Know-about-Child-Abuse.aspx)

Last Updated 4/17/2023

Source American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Child Abuse and Neglect (Copyright © 2023)

The information contained on this Web site should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.