

Young children don't view their bodies as something sexual or shameful. It's just a body with parts for them to explore. And some of their body parts feel better than others when touched. It is good to be aware of any sexual play and understand if it is normal or is something concerning. Normal sexual play for children includes:

Preschool Age¹ (Age 2- 5 years old):

- Curiosity about the difference between boys and girls and about pregnancy and birth.
- Touching their genitals in public or private.
- Looking at or touching friends or siblings' genitals.
- Showing their genitals to other children their age.
- Curiosity to see other kids or adults naked.

School-aged Children:²

- Will become more aware of social rules for sexual talk and behavior.
- Will likely become more modest and sensitive to being seen undressed.
- May masturbate in private.
- May be more curious about adult sexual behavior.
- May begin puberty.
- Older school-age children may begin developing an interest in romantic relationships. This may involve holding hands, kissing, and touching.

How to Respond

When your child asks questions or exhibits sexual behaviors, it's important to respond appropriately. Talking to them calmly and patiently will help keep you and your child communicating with each other. It's also important to answer their questions honestly.

If you find your child acting sexually, the first step is not to *freak* out. Getting mad, slapping hands away, or punishing your child will likely scare or shame them. Acting embarrassed and laughing at their actions or questions can also make them uncomfortable and not want to talk to you in the future. Children do have a natural curiosity and they will seek out information. If you are open and calm, your child will likely come to you first with any questions or sexual concerns rather than going to other children or adults.³

When your child is old enough to understand instruction, teach them what behavior is *appropriate* and what isn't. Here are some examples of how to guide them:

- They can touch their non-private parts anytime and anywhere. But it is never appropriate to show their private parts in public or to other people.
- It's not okay to touch someone else's private parts.
- No one, but mommy or daddy, should touch their private parts, and that's only to wipe a bottom, give a bath, or if there is a problem. And once they are able, they will do those things for themselves.
- Their body belongs to them. No one has the right to touch, look at, or photograph the private parts of their body. Nor should anyone ask them to look at the private parts of someone else. If they do, they need to come and talk to you.
- Sometimes a doctor or nurse needs to touch them, but mom or dad will always be there.
- Teach them to call their private parts by their correct names. A penis. A vagina. A bottom. Breasts or chest. Private parts. Avoid sexualized or silly names like, "little hooters" or "chi-chi's" for breasts, or a wee-wee for a penis.^{1,4}

Sometimes parents worry that if they talk to their child about sex, it's like giving them permission to do it. But research has found that the more well-informed a child is, the more likely they are to *postpone* sex.³ This is a great time to teach limits on how far those feelings can be acted out. Keep communication about their bodies and sex on-going in an *age*-appropriate way. It's important to keep talking to your child all throughout childhood, but only tell them what they are ready to hear.

Protecting Your Children

If you are a single mom, your children are at greater risk for sexual abuse.^{5,6} Sexual abusers often target children from single-parent families or broken homes. They look for children who are especially passive, quiet, troubled, or lonely.⁷ They take their time to build a relationship with the child and often with you too. This is called grooming. Because you are a single parent, your children are more likely to be away from you while you work, giving more access to the abuser. As scary as this sounds, there are things you can do to safeguard your children. Don't make it easy for a sexual predator to target your family. You can do this by:

- Keep your dating relationships separate from your children, and never leave your kids alone with your dates or boy-friends.
- Have a trusted family member, a licensed day-care facility, or after-school program watch your children when you have to work.
- Before ever allowing your child to go on a sleepover, make sure you know the family VERY well and know that they share the same values and enforce the same safeguards that you do.
- Keep young children off of social media all together and only give them supervised and very limited access to electronics.
- For older kids, make sure you have the passwords to their devices and apps and are friends on all of their social media accounts. Teach your kids that it is never okay to send nude pictures of themselves over the Internet or give any of their personal information out to anyone on-line. Let your kids know that at any time, you may access their device and look at their usage. Set limits and filters on their devices and have a good screen-time plan in place for your family.

Red Flags

*The red flags for sexual abuse are:*⁸

- A child exhibits sexual behavior that is inappropriate for their age.
- A child reverts back to bed-wetting or soiling the bed.
- A child is suddenly afraid of being left alone with certain people or is unusually afraid of being away from you.
- A child avoids removing clothes for changing or bathing.
- A child excessively talks or has knowledge about sexual topics.
- A child shows signs of trauma to their genital area.

If you notice any of these, contact your medical provider or the police right away.

Resources include:

1. American Academy of Pediatrics. Sexual Behaviors in Young Children: What's Normal, What's Not? Found at <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/preschool/Pages/Sexual-Behaviors-Young-Children.aspx>, accessed 9/16/2019.
2. Harborview Center for Sexual Assault & Traumatic Stress. Sexual Behavior and Children: When Is It a Problem and What to Do About It. Found at http://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/PDF/infobrochures/sexual_behavior.pdf, accessed 9/16/2019.
3. American Academy of Pediatrics. Common Sexual Concerns. Found at <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/puberty/Pages/Common-Sexual-Concerns.aspx>, accessed 9/16/2019.
4. Webb, R. & Mitchell, J. Child Lures Prevention. A Profile of the Child Molester. Found at <https://childluresprevention.com/resources/molester-profile/>, accessed 9/16/2019.
5. Holmes, WC. Men's childhood sexual abuse histories by one-parent versus two-parent status of childhood home. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*. 2007 Apr 1;61(4):319-25.
6. Darkness to Light. Child Sexual Abuse Statistics Risk Factors. Found at http://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Statistics_4_Risk_Factors.pdf, accessed 9/16/2019.
7. Elliott, M., Browne, K., & Kilcoyne, J. Child sexual abuse prevention: What offenders tell us. *Child abuse & neglect*. 1995 May 1;19(5):579-94.
8. Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN). Warning Signs for Young Children. Found at <https://www.rainn.org/articles/warning-signs-young-children>, accessed 9/16/2019.
9. Tracy, N. Healthy Place. Sexual Abusers – Who are These Child Abusers? Found at <https://www.healthypace.com/abuse/child-sexual-abuse/sexual-abusers-who-are-these-child-abusers/>, accessed 9/16/2019.