

How Children Develop Sexually

Children begin learning about themselves as sexual beings beginning at birth. The information listed below outlines the typical thoughts and behaviors related to sexuality that many children experience and exhibit as they progress through each new developmental stage. It helps parents to better understand what is considered “typical” or “predictable” behaviors at a specific age. It also helps parents to better understand the differences between age-appropriate and concerning problematic sexual behaviors.

Birth - Age 2

- Infants contact with others is sensory and/or tactile
- Primary gratification comes from sucking, being held, or cuddled
- Reflexive erections common in boys
- Vaginal lubrication can occur in girls
- Infants may randomly grab own genitals
- Exploratory play with genitals common (boys at 6-7 months, 10-11 months)
- May engage in rhythmic rocking for genital stimulation
- Interested in and talk about sexual body parts during toilet training
- Beginning awareness of gender identity and role differences
- Curious about male/female anatomical differences and urination habits

Preschool: Ages 3 - 5

- Intense curiosity about differences between male and female bodies
- May talk about anatomical differences between males and females
- Heightened interest in bathroom/dressing activities of others
- Name calling/word games about body parts and functions
- Mutual games between children involving exploratory sexual play such as playing house or doctor
- Conscious masturbation for pleasurable feelings
- Begins to ask questions regarding urination, pregnancy, and delivery
- Do not have a strong sense of modesty, enjoys own nudity
- Mimic adult sexual behavior
- Ask questions or peek under the clothing of dolls or friends

School-Aged: 6 - 9

- Children continue to explore their bodies
- Increased focus on male/female roles
- Pose questions regarding conception, pregnancy, and birth
- Practice roles through play activities (“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours”)
- Initiate competitive games involving urination and sexual activity such as peeing contests or truth/dare
- Looks for nude pictures in books, magazines, circulars
- Private masturbation
- Talks about sex with same-gender friends
- Can distinguish between sexual and non-sexual touching
- Feelings of needing privacy begin to emerge
- Continue sexual play activities
- Have strong same gender friendships
- Have a basic sexual orientation

Preadolescence: Ages 10 - 12

- Puberty (including menstruation and wet dreams) begins for some children
- Giggling and talking about physical changes
- Child often feels awkward about physical changes; worries that about developing too slowly or too rapidly; is concerned and embarrassed about physical changes
- Self-focused on body development, and compares self to same gender peers
- Reads information about sex with avid interest
- Intense interest in viewing other’s bodies
- Discreet masturbation
- Some children may begin sexual/romantic fantasies
- Social relationships begin: flirting, hand holding, kissing, spending time together
- Sexual exploration is with approximately same-aged peers
- Erections result from erotic as well as non-erotic stimuli
- Become more modest and express a need for privacy
- Experience emotional ups and downs due to hormones
- Have romantic crushes on friends, older teens, teachers, or celebrities
- Strongly influenced by peer group

This information was expanded and adapted from: *When Sex Is the Subject: Attitudes and Answers for Young Children* by Pamela M. Wilson, MSW (Santa Cruz: Network Publication, 1991)