

Fact Sheets for Families

Children and Sexuality

Young children learn, grow and develop at an amazing rate in all areas. Parents and teachers are delighted in their growth with few exceptions—and sexual awareness seems to be one of them. Even though we know that children between the ages of 2 and 6 will become aware of genital differences between the sexes, develop curiosity about how babies are made, and explore their own and their friends' bodies, many of us become very uncomfortable about it anyway.

Laying the foundation

During the early years, we are laying the foundation for future development. Parents need to clarify in their own minds what they want for their child in the area of sexuality. With these values clearly in mind, it is easier to respond to specific incidents in a way that promotes growth in those values. Values might include sexual enjoyment, freedom to express oneself sexually, health issues, responsibility for sexual behavior, respect for one's body, respect for other people's bodies, exploitation of sex and procreation.

Age-Appropriate Behavior and Responses

In addition, adults must consider the age of the child. Children will exhibit certain behavior and be able to understand information based on their age.

For example, children discover their genitals in much the same way they discover the rest of their body—with a great deal of touching. This will occur between one and two years of age and, because the touching is pleasurable, will likely continue or expand into masturbation. Touching of the genitals may also become a response to nervousness or boredom.

In most cases, touching or self-exploration in the first 2 or 3 years should be considered part of the process of learning about the body. The older child should be

responded to in a way consistent with the family's values. Developmentally appropriate responses range from ignoring the behavior to setting limits as to when and where the behavior is allowed, such as "I know that feels good, but playing with your penis is private. You need to do that in your room."



Children's natural curiosity will next lead to exploration of other children's bodies. This "sex play" may be exploitive with an older child of 4 or 5 undressing and handling the genitals of a younger child or it may be mutual with children taking turns looking and touching. Either way, many adults are offended or upset when confronted with this behavior. It is important to remember that this behavior is normal and that the situation can be used to teach your values.

Redirecting a child's focus

Redirection and addressing a child's natural curiosity may be the most appropriate response. Adults may also establish rules for appropriate behavior, such as "Johnny, I can't let you touch the private parts of Susan's body. I have a book you can look at to see what a girl's body looks like. Let's look at the book together."

Children may attempt to insert objects in genital openings. This behavior can be labeled as unsafe and compared to putting objects in the nose or ears, such as "I can't let you put that in your vagina. That could hurt your body just like it could hurt your ear or nose to put something into it."

Children may imitate what they have seen

Children exploring on their own will not usually link kissing and hugging with body exploration, but if they have observed these events in combination through television, observing adults or other children, or looking at pornographic literature, they may simulate intercourse or other sexual behavior. Immediate redirection is appropriate. Parents observing or receiving reports of this type of behavior from their child care providers should try to learn where their child was exposed to this material and protect their child from additional exposure to it. Young children are not ready to deal with sexually explicit material! Remember, you are teaching your child a value system and it is acquired during daily living and activities. Be sure you are providing experiences to reinforce your values and avoiding experiences that detract from them.



California Childcare Health Program
UCSF School of Nursing
cchp.ucsf.edu
2004