UnityPoint Health

Understanding Sexual Development and Behaviors in Children

These behaviors do not determine if a child has been sexually abused. This information is meant to help caregivers understand what typical sexual development looks like. There are also suggestions on how to respond to and educate children about behaviors and sexuality in an age-appropriate way.

NATURAL & HEALTHY | These behaviors are typical to the age range. Some children may engage in several of the behaviors while some may engage in none.

Preschool Children	• Touches their own private parts privately or publicly. This may be a soothing, rather than problematic behavior. • May engage in activities with children the same age that explores private parts such as "house" or "doctor."	• May ask questions about bodies or reproduction, such as "where do babies come from?" • May seem curious about adult bodies (such as wanting to go into the bathroom with caregivers and/or noticing differences in body types). • May take off diaper or clothes in public or around others.
Kindergarten through 4th Grade	• Jokes about body parts and functions ("potty humor"). • May continue to engage in activities with children the same age that explores private parts such as "house" or "doctor" and/or may begin comparing genitals or bodies.	• May begin talking about romantic relationships and/or the topic of sex with peers. • May begin asking questions about animal parts or breeding behavior.
5th Grade through 12th Grade	• Tells caregivers they want or need more privacy. May or may not ask questions about sexual topics or puberty; may seek information regarding puberty from other sources (friends or online); may or may not address changes to their body during puberty.	• Talks about sex with friends; shows interest and may begin a "dating" relationship or "talking to" someone. Flirts with people in their own age group and may exaggerate sexual experiences to peers.

CONCERNING | These behaviors are not usually typical for the age range and may indicate the child knows or has been exposed to sex talk, jokes, images or behaviors beyond what other children their age may have been exposed to.

Preschool Children	• Continues to touch their own private parts in public after being told "no" consistently. Hurts own private parts due to touching. • Touches the private parts of other children or adults after being told not to do so. Lies or denies touching others' private parts.	• Looks at others' private parts or exposes their own private parts after being told "no" consistently. • Asks unfamiliar people about bodies or reproduction. Imitates sexual acts or uses sexual words.
Kindergarten through 4th Grade	• Talks about sex and sexual acts in inappropriate settings (family events, in public, etc.). • Wants to play "sex" games and/or compare private parts with much younger, older or unfamiliar children. Forces or tricks others to play sex games.	• Kisses, hugs and/or touches unfamiliar adults or children. Talks about romantic relationships/crushes in terms of sex. • Touches or plays with the private parts of animals; sex play with animals.
5th Grade through 12th Grade	• Demonstrates negative emotions or reactions (defensiveness, shame, anxiety, etc.) when caregivers attempt to talk about puberty or sex. Attempts to change or hide the body's development. • Talks with others about sex even when that person has voiced they do not want to talk about it. Engages in "sexting" or sending nude pictures online despite caregivers' safety rules. Lies about their age online. • Frequently watches videos/media with sexual content, including content with sexual violence or other children.	• Causes injury or irritation to private parts due to frequent masturbation. Masturbates in public or in front of siblings/peers/others despite caregivers' privacy rules. • Doesn't see the harm or danger in inappropriate relationships; seeks sexual attention or relations from individuals much older or much younger than them. • Shows interest in playing "sex" games with peers much younger or older than themselves. Tricks or forces others to play "sex" games. Touches private parts of others during games even when asked to stop.

Tips for caregivers to promote healthy body awareness and body safety development.

Preschool Children

- Gently establish rules about when and where it is okay to touch their own private parts. Do your best not to shame or embarrass children in front of others for their curiosity.
- Provide basic information, including the correct names for body parts, uses of body parts, and reproduction.
- Teach children their body belongs to them and they can say no to unwanted touch and play. Also teach them it is not okay to touch someone else's body without permission.

Kindergarten through 4th Grade

- Educate on personal rights and responsibilities related to relationships (ex: "your body belongs to you).
- Talk about changes that will occur during puberty. Educate on consent related to their ability to say "yes" or "no" and also respecting the rights of others.
- Ask the child what questions they have about sex and answer in an honest, age-appropriate way, including the basics of human reproduction and intercourse.
- Ask the child what questions they have about animal mating and answer in an age-appropriate, honest way.

5th Grade through 12th Grade

- Provide information about puberty and changes to the body. Let the child know they can talk with caregivers about their bodies without judgment.
- Continue to discuss consent and the risks of sharing nude pictures/videos with others online. Support the development of healthy "dating" relationships and encourage honest conversations about the relationship with caregivers.
- Discuss how viewing sexually violent media can lead to unhealthy behaviors in a relationship. Provide information about sexual behaviors that are illegal including child sexual abuse, forcing or tricking someone into sexual acts, and other non consensual behaviors.
- Provide basic and age-appropriate information about sexuality, sexual behaviors, sexually transmitted infections, etc.
- Talk about cyber and in person bullying. Discuss ways to stand up for themselves and others when they notice bullying behaviors and identify online privacy rules.
- Discuss each individual's rights to be safe and have their body respected. Talk through examples of situations that may occur and ways the child can make healthy relationship decisions. Encourage healthy friendships and relationships and model these skills around the child.



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