

## Stages of Sexual Development and What to Teach at Each Stage

### Birth to 8 years

- Curious about own body, including own genitals
- Self-stimulation is normal and pleasurable
- Curious about differences between male/female bodies
- Gender identity develops (knows "I am a boy")
- May engage in sex play with peers ("you show me yours and I'll show you mine")
- Enjoys "potty talk" especially at mealtimes
- Interested in where babies come from, pregnancy, birth
- May learn expected male and female behaviors

### What to Teach

- ✓ Accurate names and functions of all body parts
- ✓ Sexual parts of our bodies are special and private and we keep them covered in public
- ✓ Difference between public and private
- ✓ Similarities and differences between boys and girls
- ✓ People have the right to refuse touch from anyone at any time (we don't touch people who don't want to be touched)
- ✓ Masturbation/self-stimulation is normal and pleasurable, but should be done only in private
- ✓ Where babies come from (accurate, simple, age-appropriate)
- ✓ Bodies are all different and good, just the way they are

## Sexual Development (continued)

### Ages 9-13

- Puberty begins (wide timetable for physical and emotional changes)
- Sexual attraction for children of same or opposite gender may begin
- Sexual orientation usually known or suspected
- Curiosity about puberty, reproduction, sexual feelings and attractions though child is often reluctant to discuss these things with parents
- Peers become VERY important. Peer pressure influences: clothing, music, values, sexual practices, drug/alcohol use, smoking
- Rapid mood swings are normal

### What to teach

- ✓ Body changes – body hair, menstruation, breast development, vaginal lubrication, penis/testicle growth, erections, wet dreams, hygiene, skin changes
- ✓ Masturbation – what it is, and it's done only in private
- ✓ Reproduction and pregnancy – what intercourse is, that it should only be done between consenting adults
- ✓ Puberty happens at different ages and rates for everyone
- ✓ Hormones and their effects on boys and girls
- ✓ Right to refuse touch from anyone at anytime, and need to respect that others have same right
- ✓ Gender roles and stereotypes (address and debunk myths)

## Sexual Development (continued)

### Ages 14-18

- Increased interest in dating and sexual relationships
- Are physically able to become pregnant (sometimes as young as age 10)
- Peer pressure still important, though may begin to lessen toward end of this period
- May engage in risky or even delinquent behavior – brains are still immature and child may not be able to make consistently healthy decisions
- Increased interest in being independent, driving, having sex, tattoos, piercings, getting jobs to earn spending money, clothes

### What to teach

- ✓ Reproduction, pregnancy, birth – in greater detail
- ✓ Sexually transmitted infections and how to protect themselves
- ✓ Birth control and condom use
- ✓ How to say “NO” to unwanted sexual contact
- ✓ Respecting boundaries and personal space of self and others
- ✓ Body image and changes, gender roles, stereotypes
- ✓ Differences between healthy vs. unhealthy romantic relationships

## Sexual Development<sup>6</sup>

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### Birth to 2 years old

From a very early age, children are curious about their bodies. Babies as young as three to five months old may touch their private parts. This touching and even masturbation are normal and natural. For children, touching their private parts and masturbating feels good and is calming. Children do not have the same feelings as mature adults in these actions.

Early in their lives, children begin to recognize that there is a difference between being male or female. Children learn that some differences are related to body parts, but when children learn about boys and girls, they learn more than body differences. Children form their identities early and realize that there are expectations related to their gender. Society teaches children very early about gender roles and how they should or should not act. Often, from the time children are born, parents buy different toys for their sons and daughters and may decorate children's rooms differently for boys and girls.



### 2-5 years old

During these years, children learn to dress and undress themselves. Many children enjoy being naked, and may become very interested in how others look under their clothes. This behavior is normal. It is important to talk with children about what "private" means, as well as what things should not be done in front of other people. This is the time when children can begin to understand that sexuality is private.

Boys and girls both masturbate as a natural way of exploring their bodies. Children may masturbate more between the ages of two and five than later in childhood. At this age, masturbating often helps children relax and feel calm. It helps if parents and providers make rules with children about when and where these behaviors are okay. However, if adults make too many rules, children may become ashamed of their bodies.

Children at this age will begin to use language to name their body parts and bodily functions. It is important to teach the technical terms for these parts and functions. For example, they should know the words "vagina," "vulva," "penis," and "anus." They should know "urinate" and "bowel movement" as well. Children may be more comfortable using slang words, but it is also important for them to know the technical terms. Slang words are often confusing and may mean different things to different people. Children may also feel embarrassed when they do not know the correct terms.

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<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.ces.purdue.edu/providerparent/Child%20Growth-Development/SexualDEV.htm> on August 3, 2004. For more information, contact Judith A. Myers-Walls, Ph.D., CFLE at [myerswal@cfs.purdue.edu](mailto:myerswal@cfs.purdue.edu) or at 765-494-2959. Purdue University is an equal opportunity/equal access employer. Copyright © 2003-2004, Purdue University



### 6-9 years old

During these years, boys and girls begin to look noticeably different. By the end of this time, some girls may start early stages of puberty. Both boys and girls may start sweating and needing deodorant, and pimples may begin to be a problem. These are early signs of sexual development, but children may not see them that way. The changes may just embarrass them.

Children often become curious about sexuality as they begin to go through these physical changes. They might show this curiosity in the ways they play with others; for example, some children may want to show other children their underwear or private parts. Some may try to see others' bodies. It is also normal during these years for children to continue exploring their bodies through masturbation.

Children learn a lot about sexuality through these years. They also learn much more about what it means to be a boy or a girl. Sexual language is also used more at this age, to call others names or to show others what they know. Children at this age usually understand the secrecy that surrounds sexuality, as well as what behavior is appropriate in public. Adults can help children learn to use respectful and appropriate sexual language.



### 10-12 years old

In these years, children's sexual development is very active. These preteens continue to be curious about sexuality, usually because it is very important to them now. Some girls start having periods, and their breasts begin to develop. Boy's voices may begin to change, and they start to grow pubic hair. These changes can make young people feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, and suddenly very private. Masturbation can be helpful as young people start feeling new urges; however, they need to understand privacy.

During these times of rapid change, children often have questions about the physical changes their bodies are going through. It can be hard for adults to discuss these things, and young people may also feel embarrassed. However, it is good both for children and adults to talk about sexuality. Children at this age can gain a clearer understanding of sexuality through exploration and education.

## Indicators Of Child Sexual Abuse<sup>9</sup>

Children respond to sexual abuse and stressors in a variety of ways. Some children may show no sign, while other children may show multiple signs. Please note that very few of the symptoms listed below are absolute signs that a child has been sexually abused. Many of the signs listed could be symptomatic of any number of problems a child may be having. The primary indicator of sexual abuse is any sudden or severe change in a child's behavior and/or health. Listen to your "gut"; it is often our best tool in recognizing abuse in children!

### Physical Indicators Of Child Sexual Abuse:

- Trauma to breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen or thighs.
- Bruises, bleeding or other physical trauma in genital or rectal area.
- Genital or rectal pain, itching, swelling, redness, infection or discharge.
- Pain or problems with urination/defecation.
- Bloodstained and/or torn underwear.
- Difficulty in walking, sitting or sitting still.
- Sexually transmitted diseases.
- Presence of semen.
- Unusual odors from the vaginal area.
- Psychosomatic illness, e.g. abdominal pain, nightmares.

### Behavioral/Emotional Indicators Of Child Sexual Abuse:

- When a child reports sexual abuse either directly, or indirectly in a disguised way e.g. "I know a girl who..."
- Persistent and inappropriate sexual play with peers, toys, animals or themselves, e.g. child habitually inserting objects in her vagina, or sexually aggressive behavior towards others.
- Detailed and overly sophisticated understanding of sexual behavior (especially by young children).
- Sexual themes in the child's artwork, stories or play.
- Sudden onset of soiling pants or bed long after being potty trained.
- Acting like a much younger child/regressing.
- Pseudo-mature behaviors, e.g. acting like a parent or spouse.
- Overly compliant behavior.
- Delinquent or aggressive behavior.
- Excessive crying or sadness.
- Withdrawal into fantasy worlds. (A child may even seem to have an intellectual disability when this is not the case.)
- Difficulty eating or sleeping.
- Fear of going home or expressing a desire to live in a foster home or institution.
- Fear states, e.g. anxiety, depression, phobias, and obsession.
- Fear of adults of the same sex as the abuser.
- Poor or deteriorating relationships with peers.

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<sup>9</sup> Used with permission. ©1999 Southern Health Care Network. For more information visit:  
<http://www.secasa.com.au/index.php/family/12/120>

## **Behavioral/Emotional Indicators Of Child Sexual Abuse (con't)**

- Inability to concentrate in school and/or sudden deterioration in school performance.
- Non-participation in school and social activities.
- Unwillingness to participate in physical/recreational activities, especially if there is physical discomfort.
- Arriving late to school or leaving early.
- Unexplained accumulation of money or gifts.
- Truancy/running away from home.
- Excessively seductive behavior and/or sexual activity. (This is an effect of the sexual abuse, not a cause.)
- Drug/alcohol abuse.
- Prostitution. (There is a strong correlation between child sexual abuse and late teenage prostitution.)
- Self-mutilation.
- Suicidal feelings and suicide attempts.