

Sexual Development in Young Children

Did you know that pink was not always for girls or blue for boys? A 1918 article in the *Ladies Home Journal* said, “The reason is that pink being a more decided and stronger color is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl.” Assigning certain colors to boys or girls is just one example of how we recognize the differences between boys and girls, and helps explain why it is entirely normal for young children to notice, explore and talk about gender differences and sexuality.

Normal stages of early sexual development

- Growing awareness of gender—by age 2 or 3, children develop a sense of being male or female
- Curiosity about where babies come from
- Development of a sense of modesty, along with an understanding of what should be public or private
- Preoccupation with bodily functions, in language and in play

- Development of trust through physical contact with others, such as being hugged and cuddled
- Enjoyment of being naked and taking off clothes
- Exploration of and enjoyment of touching own private parts (masturbation)

Tips for promoting healthy sexual development

- Answer questions (such as where babies come from) honestly, matter-of-fact, and in a normal tone of voice. Answer the specific question, not more than was asked; add details as the child matures.
- Don't scold, shame or punish children for asking questions or for sexual expression.
- Don't punish children for self-stimulating, but explain appropriate public and private behavior.

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- Use everyday situations to teach aspects of sexuality; for example, when Mom is pregnant.
- Express affection; recognize that even for young children positive physical feelings are associated with being loved.
- Don't reinforce stereotypes related to gender roles; let boys play with dolls and girls with trucks.
- Be alert for behavior indicating that something abnormal or abusive might be going on: excessive anxiety, especially about body parts; knowing more about sexual activity than is normal for the child's age; obsession with self-stimulation; attempts to make other children do sexual things.

R E S O U R C E S

Sexual Health and Safety. Zero to Three. <http://bit.ly/2kTnLhQ>

Sexual Development and Behavior in Children: Information for Parents and Caregivers. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network.
<http://bit.ly/2mrGJMG>

Sexual Behaviors in Young Children: What's Normal, What's Not? Healthy Children. <http://bit.ly/2kSgZsE>

Programs and families can contact the program leadership directly at PAIECMH@pakeys.org with questions or concerns.

