

Developmentally Appropriate Sexual Behaviors

Adapted from *Stop it Now!*, www.stopitnow.org

It is important to recognize that while some sexual behaviors in children are concerning, all children exhibit sexual curiosity and exploration from a very early age, and much of it is healthy and appropriate. Children's curiosity about their bodies and sexuality can be expressed in healthy and unhealthy ways. Healthy expressions of curiosity include peeking or listening when family members are in the bathroom or bedroom, looking at videos, books, magazines with sexual images, and exploring their own and other children's bodies.

Sexual Play with Other Children: "normal" or "appropriate" sexual play among children usually has the following traits:

- Sexual play is lighthearted and spontaneous- children are giggling and having fun
- The play is between children of roughly the same size, age and development
- The sexual play is a part of an ongoing and mutually enjoyable play relationship/friendship
- When adults set limits (e.g., you have to keep your clothes on at daycare), the children are able to follow the rules.

If you are trying to determine if your child's sexual behaviors are developmentally-appropriate or cause for concern, these developmental charts may be of use. If you are concerned about sexual behaviors that seem uncommon or unhealthy, call our Helpline for support and resources.

Common	Uncommon
<i>Preschool (0-5 years old)</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ask questions and express knowledge related to gender differences, private parts, hygiene and toileting, pregnancy and birth. - Explore genitals and may experience pleasure - Show and look at private parts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has knowledge of specific sexual acts and explicit sexual language - Engages in adult-like sexual contact with other children
<i>School-Age (6-8 years old)</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ask questions and seek knowledge about physical development, relationships, sexual behavior, menstruation and pregnancy, erection and ejaculation, and personal values related to sex. - Experiment with same-gender and same-age children, often during games or role playing - Self-stimulate in private 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adult-like sexual encounters - Has detailed knowledge about specific sexual acts - Behaves sexually in public places (e.g., public self-stimulation, sexual acting out in public), on the phone, or on the internet.
<i>School- Age (9-12 years old) Hormonal changes and external influences (peers, media) will increase sexual awareness, feelings and interest as puberty sets in.</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seek knowledge about sexual materials and information, relationships, and sexual behavior. - Uses sexual words and discusses sexual acts and personal values with peers - Continues or increases experimentation with sexual behavior and romantic relationships - Self-stimulates in private 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regularly occurring adult-like sexual behavior - Behaving sexually in public places (e.g., public self-stimulation, sexual acting out in public)
<i>Adolescence (13-16 years old)</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seeks knowledge and has questions about sexual decision making, social relationships, sexual customs, and consequences for sexual behavior - Self-stimulates in private - Menstruation/Sperm production - Experiments sexually with adolescents in the same age group and the same or different gender - Voyeuristic behaviors are common in this age group - Approx. 1/3 of teens will have their first sexual encounter during this time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Masturbation in a public place - Sexual interest directed toward much younger children