

# Healthy Child Sexual Development

**Focus on building mutually respectful relationships with children.**  
**You can talk to your children about their bodies and sexual development because...**

- Children need to know what is okay and not okay
- Children need to know the terms for their private parts
- Children need to know that you are their source of information and are willing to have difficult conversations
- Children need to know your values about sexuality and relationships

*The table below presents information about what to expect at each age/stage of your child's development and ideas to promote healthy sexual development. Please keep in mind that children develop at different rates and every child may not fit neatly into these categories.*

## HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

## PROMOTE HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

**BIRTH  
TO  
3 YEARS**

- Asking questions about bodies, and bodily functions
- Using "bathroom" language
- Look at and touch their private parts\*\* in public and private
- Showing private parts to others
- Trying to touch others' private parts
- Wanting to be naked
- Attempting to see other people naked

- Use accurate names for body parts.
- Explain the basic anatomical differences between birth genders using simple language.
- Explain that bodies change as children grow up.
- Teach children about respectful personal boundaries without shaming the child (including keeping private parts covered, not touching others' private parts.)
- Teach children that touching their private parts is done in private.

*Answer questions calmly with simple language; honestly tell child if you don't know an answer and seek information from an expert like your pediatrician. Consult your pediatrician during well-child visits for additional guidance and resources. Control and/or monitor what children are exposed to on all media.*

**3 TO 6  
YEARS**

- Talk about private parts and use "naughty" words
- Look at and touch private parts with children their own age
- Develop a deeper understanding of gender roles
- May display same-gender and cross-gender interest in how they play and what clothing they wear

- Use accurate names for body parts.
- Explain basic anatomical differences between birth genders and how bodies change as children grow using simple language.
- Teach children about respectful personal boundaries (keeping private parts covered, not touching others' private parts.) Practice and enforce these boundaries between siblings & playmates.
- Respect child's modesty and desire for modesty and privacy\*\*\* (but explain that secrecy and private part rules apply to everyone.)
- Teach children to tell a parent, medical professional, or other trusted adult if anyone shows them things or touches them in ways that are different, confusing or they don't like.

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**6 TO 10  
YEARS**

- Play pretend games with children their own age such as "family," or "boyfriend/girlfriend"
- Be interested in sexual content in media
- Want more privacy\*\*\*
- Feel beginning attraction to/interest in peers
- May display same-gender and cross-gender interest in play and dress
- Consider their parents as a primary source of information and values

- Share your family's values about relationships, boundaries, respect and fairness.
- Supervise playdates. If the child is playing with someone much younger or older, make sure neither child is taking advantage of the other child in any way.
- Respect child's modesty and desire for privacy (but explain that secrecy and private part rules apply to everyone.)
- Teach children to tell a parent, medical professional, or other trusted adult if anyone shows them things or touches them in ways that are different, confusing or they don't like.
- Talk about family values and rules about nudity and touching other people, both at home and with others.

*Answer questions calmly with simple language; honestly tell child if you don't know an answer and seek information from an expert like your pediatrician. Consult your pediatrician during well-child visits for additional guidance and resources. Control and/or monitor what children are exposed to on all media.*

## 10 to 13 YEARS

### HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

- Feel sexual attraction to/interest in peers
- Masturbate occasionally, possibly reaching climax
- Possibly reach climax while asleep
- Play games with children their own age that involve sexual behavior (such as "spin the bottle")
- Look at pictures of naked or partially naked people
- Be interested in sexual content in media
- Begin to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity
- Begin to act as if they value the opinions of their peers over that of their family
- Experience genital arousal from touch or images, including touch and images that may be inappropriate or harmful
- Begin to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity
- May begin to experience the body changes of puberty (girls tend to develop earlier than boys)
- Engage in sexual behavior (flirting, kissing, contact)

### PROMOTE HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

- Support age-appropriate relationships (for example, don't call time with a friend a "date" or encourage make-up and dress that is too grown-up.)
- Explain the basics of human reproduction.
- Describe the physical changes that occur during puberty-breasts and menstruation for girls, facial and body hair for boys, sexual arousal for both.
- Explain risks of sexual activity (pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and disadvantages in engaging in sexual/romantic activities before ready.)
- Explain risks of on-line sexual behavior, for example-sharing sexualized photos may lead to legal issues & embarrassment if shared further, and understand that images are permanent. Do not allow access to phones or internet-connected devices after bedtime.
- Develop a safety plan with your child that includes what to do if there is unwanted touch of any type from peers or adults.
- Teach your kids about consent, for example the FRIES model <https://svpro.mcmaster.ca/prevention/learning-hub/consent/>
- Discuss contraception and preventing sexually transmitted infections.
- Ensure that your child knows that genital arousal is an 'automatic reflex'-a message that comes from the brain like getting goosebumps when cold; neither their arousal, nor anyone else's means that the child has to take any action at all.
- Ensure that children do not spend one-on-one time with an adult (tutor, coach, mentor) without careful screening beforehand and debriefing afterwards.
- Remind them to always respect other people's privacy and private parts, including siblings and younger children, including people who are sleeping.
- Give children the resource [whatsok.org](https://whatsok.org) as a safe online place to go for questions or concerns about sexuality, including their own or others' sexual experiences and behavior.
- Continue to check in periodically when they are with other children, including siblings.
- Teach children to report if anyone shows them things or touch them in ways that are confusing or they don't like.

## 13+ YEARS

### HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

- Begin or continue to experience puberty
- Want more privacy
- Look at pictures and videos of naked people
- Be interested in sexual content in media
- Experiment with romantic relationships
- Engage in sexual behavior (flirting, kissing, contact)
- Sometimes lie and keep information from parents

### PROMOTE HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

- Teach your kids about consent, for example the FRIES model <https://svpro.mcmaster.ca/prevention/learning-hub/consent/>
- Develop a safety plan with your child that includes what to do if there are unwanted touch or sexual advances from peers or adults.
- Discuss contraception & preventing sexually transmitted infections
- Discuss options should unprotected sex occur.
- Raise difficult topics with your children to keep lines of information open.
- Teach your children how to keep an eye out for each other and step in if needed. Be an upstander not a bystander.
- Explain risks of online sexual behavior, for example-sharing sexualized photos may lead to legal issues & embarrassment if shared further and understand that images are permanent. Minimize and monitor access to phones and internet after bedtime.
- Remind them to always respect other people's privacy & private parts, including siblings & younger children, including people who are sleeping or under the influence of substances.
- Give the resource [whatsok.org](https://whatsok.org) as a safe online place to go for questions or concerns about sexuality, including their own or others' sexual experiences and behavior.
- Remind them to report violations of sexual boundaries, from anyone including their peers. They can share with parents, school staff and medical staff. Have them add sexual assault crisis and mental health crisis numbers to their phones. What's OK 888-532-0550. NYS Domestic and Sexual Violence Hotline 800-942-6906. NYS Mental Health Crisis 988

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\*\*The term private parts refers to the genitals (penis and scrotum in males, vagina and labia in females and the anus).\*\*\*How do you explain the difference between privacy and secrecy to a child? Privacy means you get to do it by yourself, but trusted grown-ups (Mom, Dad, Grandparents) know about it. Children earn privacy. Secrecy means the trusted grown-ups don't know about it. It is not safe to keep secrets from trusted grown-ups, especially if another grown-up tells them to.

