

CHILD SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

Preschool (3 to 5 Years)

Learn more about normal and healthy sexual development for your child ages 3 to 5 years old.

What Is Child Sexual Development?

Child sexual development refers to the:

- Physical changes (puberty, starting menstruation, having wet dreams)
- Behavioral changes (showing affection, masturbation, partner intimacy)
- Sexual knowledge development (what gender is, what sex is, what sexual orientation is) that a child goes through in their youth.

The foundation for sexual development starts when a child is a baby. At each age, your child should show some behaviors that seem sexual.

Remember, your child is learning and growing. At times, these age-appropriate behaviors may call for a teaching moment, rather than discipline. Consider how your personal beliefs and family values may impact your child's sexual development.

What Do Healthy Behaviors Look Like in Preschoolers?

Your preschooler may:

- Explore their body through touch, including touching their genitals.
- Ask basic questions about bodies or how babies are made.
- Play games to act out family relationships and gender roles.
- Talk or joke about body parts or functions.
- Be curious when other people are naked.
- Be interested in how others use the bathroom.

How Can You Help Your Child Have Healthy Sexual Development?

There are age-appropriate ways to teach your preschooler about healthy sexual development. You will build on these basics as they grow and mature.

At this age, you can:

- Use medically current terms for all body part, including genitalia (sexual organs).

- Say what actions are happening, including when bathing, toileting, and dressing.
- Answer your child's questions honestly, with age-appropriate information.
- Teach and model privacy when bathing, toileting, and changing clothes.
- Respect your child's boundaries. Support when your child says or signals "no" to physical touch or affection.
- Talk about appropriate touch. Tell your child that some body parts are private and aren't for others to see or touch.
- Model safe, healthy relationships in your interactions with others.
- Closely monitor technology use to avoid accidental exposure to sexual content.
- Try not to react more strongly than the situation calls for. Your child may need redirection or correction at times. Remember they are learning and growing.

When Should You Talk to Your Child's Provider?

There is a wide range of development for preschoolers. If something concerns you, tell your provider.

Also, tell the provider if your child:

- Touches their genitals in public after being redirected multiple times
- Touches or rubs own genitals in a way that may cause pain or injury.
- Forces other kids to act out adult sexual behavior when playing.
- Uses adult sexual language.
- Has access to adult sexual content or shares this content with other children.