

CHILD SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

Teenagers (13 to 17 Years)

Learn more about normal and healthy sexual development for your child ages 13 to 17 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 Teenagers?

It is normal and healthy for children in their teen years to have some behavior that may seem sexual.

Your teenager may:

- Continue puberty. This will include both physical and emotional changes.
- Touch their genitals, or masturbate, in private for pleasure. Masturbation is a normal way for teens to explore their bodies and sexuality.
- Look for books or websites that will teach them about sex. This may include watching pornography.
- Have sexual interest in peers and begin dating. They may show emotional growth in how they treat a partner with longer, more mature relationships.
- Start to recognize the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- Want to be close to someone physically and emotionally. They may show affection with friends by hugging or kissing to show love and support.
- Explore their identity by learning about gender and self-expression.
- Share their sexual orientation. They may tell others they are straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual even if they have not had a romantic or sexual relationship yet.

- Sex text with a same aged peer. Teenagers may think sexting is an innocent activity if it is done with mutual consent, but teens should understand that problems can still happen.
- Know about or be curious about important sexual health information including reproduction, contraception, and sexually transmitted infections.
- Say “no” to things they do not want to do. This helps build respect for their own personal boundaries and the boundaries of others.
- Want to do more things on their own or ask for more privacy.

How Can You Help Your Child Have Healthy Sexual Development?

There are age-appropriate ways to teach your teen about healthy sexual development. You will build on these basics as they grow and mature. This will help them make healthy choices about relationships and sexuality.

At this age, you can:

- Share your **family values** about love, dating, and sex. Listen to what your child thinks and believes.
- Talk to your child about sexual development. Teach about puberty, reproduction, and sexually transmitted Infections (STIs).
- Use correct medical terms for male and female genitals (sexual organs).
- Prepare for conversations about sexual healthcare. Help them find the medical care they need.
- Discuss the many forms of showing love. There are different ways to show you care about someone.
- Talk about what to think about before having sex such as age, consent, preventing pregnancy and infections, and emotional readiness.
- Help your teen notice when they feel uneasy or uncomfortable in situations. **Make a plan** to help them if they need to get away or feel unsafe.
- Use words that include all sexual orientations and identities, so your teen feels accepted and understood.
- Talk about safe and unsafe ways to use phones and the internet. Remind them about the law and your family’s rules for image sharing.
- Be aware of your reactions. Your teen might bring up a question or topic that surprises you. Stay calm to show them their questions and perspectives are okay.

When Should You Talk to Your Child’s Provider?

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

Also, tell the provider if your teen:

- Has a romantic or sexual relationship with someone much older or much younger than them.
- Talks about or views people only as sexual objects for sexual pleasure.
- Is often on websites with sexual content.
- Bullies people in a sexual way online or in person.
- Uses sexually inappropriate words or actions to intentionally make people uncomfortable or hurt their feelings.
- Has a hard time adjusting to their sexual orientation or who they are attracted to.
- Masturbates in public or at a frequency that gets in the way of daily life.
- Does sexual acts to get people to like them or for money or other rewards.
- Pressures or makes others do sexual things they do not want to do.
- Takes or shares photos or videos of sexual acts without the other person’s permission.
- Watches people when they are naked or having sex without their consent.