Ages and Stages of Sexual Development

Puberty: Wonder Years

Ages 5-8: Middle Childhood

What Is Natural and Healthy?

Children gather information about everything as they move through childhood; this includes natural and healthy sexual exploration. Children are learning about bodies, gender roles and behaviors, and relationships. Thus, between 40 and 85% of children will engage in some form of sexual behavior by age 13. Childhood curiosity that results in voluntary sexual exploration between children of similar age, size, and development is normal. Games like playing doctor, playing house, and spin the bottle are ways for children to learn about themselves and others.

This can make adults uncomfortable if they aren't expecting this as a normal part of childhood. It can also make adults afraid that children have been sexually abused if they are not alert to the difference between natural, typical behaviors and problematic behaviors that might be warning signs of trauma. It is important for adults to respond calmly and avoid shaming children when they are discovered in sexual exploration. Since most adults want to believe that children are asexual and innocent, it has been difficult for researchers to study healthy childhood sexuality. Therefore, most of the research on childhood sexuality is based on children who have experienced child abuse.

Ways to Promote Healthy Sexual Development

The chart on the reverse side describes some typical childhood behaviors and compares them to behaviors that might indicate a problem. Some children exhibit some of these typical behaviors and some do not. It also describes how *Puberty: The Wonder Years* can help adults support children's healthy sexual development.

Sexual behaviors during middle childhood are based in curiosity. Younger children are less self-conscious about talking about bodies and exploration. Children this age will often seek information from their parents and other trusted adults.



BETWEEN 40 AND 85% OF CHILDREN WILL ENGAGE IN SOME FORM OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOR BY AGE 13.

Less Shame... More Wonder www.PubertyCurriculum.com

Ages and Stages of Sexual Development

Ages 5-8: Middle Childhood			
Typical Behavior	May Be Problematic	Needed Support for Healthy Development	How Puberty: The Wonder Years Helps
Show deeper under- standing of gender roles Act in a more "gendered" manner as expected behaviors and norms associated with gender are learned (e.g., girls may want to wear dresses)	Play male or female roles in an angry or aggressive manner Hate their own or other gender	Discuss responsibilities (e.g., treat boys and girls equally) related to sexuality. Promote a solid understanding of gender and how children experience their gender identity. Children who identify as transgender or gender expansive will experience this also but can face confusion and may need increased support from adults. Expose to non-stereotyped gender roles. Explain that there are various sexual orientations such as straight, gay, and bisexual.	Helps children identify the helpful roles each family member plays and express appreciation for all contributions Defines gender and leads discus- sions about gender, gender roles, expectations, and stereotypes Encourage children to be and do what they like, whatever their gender Defines sexual orientation and gender identity and promotes respect for all individuals
Use slang words, "potty humor" or jokes to describe body parts and functions	Have excessive interest, knowledge, or language about sexualized behaviors Display persistent sexual themes in talk, play, art	Provide the accurate names of body parts and functions.	Teaches the proper terms for body parts Replaces slang words with accurate terms Explains the functions of the reproductive system
Try to see other people naked or using the bathroom	Have knowledge of sexual behaviors not typical for their age Refuse to allow people their privacy	Talk about the physical changes that will occur during puberty. Explain the basics of human reproduction, including the role of vaginal intercourse.	Describes the physical, social, and emotional changes in puberty Compares animal reproduction with human reproduction and family responsibilities Teaches how to respect personal body space
Explore bodies and sexuality through sex play or activities that may occur with same- and other-sex friends or siblings	Sexual contact that is coerced or between children with four or more years age difference Act out sexualized behaviors not typical for children of their age	Explain the accurate names of body parts and functions to address natural curiosity. Educate on personal rights (e.g., "your body belongs to you"). Explain how to respect their own bodies and those of others.	Teaches the proper terms for body parts Explains the functions of the reproductive system Teaches the social skills to demon- strate respect for self and others Teaches personal hygiene
Masturbate, touch their genitals for pleasure or self-soothing, privately rather than in public	Cannot redirect their masturbation when asked	Teach that masturbation is something that occurs in private.	Suggests model answers to provide when children ask about masturbation
Experience erections	Fear of erection, painful erection, or hurting self to stop erection	Teach that erections are normal and natural.	Teaches that erections are a normal and natural event during puberty