

Ages and Stages of Sexual Development

Puberty:
the Wonder Years

Ages 9-12: Late 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 late childhood might be more concealed as children learn that some words and behaviors are not socially acceptable. Children at this age are becoming more independent and may begin to seek information from media and their peers.



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

Less Shame... More Wonder

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Typical Behavior	May Be Problematic	Needed Support for Healthy Development	How <i>Puberty: The Wonder Years</i> Helps
Express an increased need for privacy and independence as puberty begins	Over-concern about their bodies, such as wearing multiple layers of clothing	Provide ongoing information about the physical aspects of puberty and changes in their body. Reassure that it is normal for everyone to be unique, but that everyone eventually gets through puberty.	Teaches that everyone experiences puberty in their own timing Describes the physical, social, and emotional changes of puberty Provides Family Partnership Flyers to give parents and other trusted adults ways to talk with children about puberty
Show interest in relationships Want to have a girlfriend or boyfriend	Degradation or humiliation of self or others using sexual themes	Encourage characteristics of healthy friendships and relationships. Help to normalize the new emotions and needs that they may be experiencing. Remind children that it is okay to fit in with their peers, but not to stop thinking for themselves or get carried away by the crowd.	Teaches how to develop healthy relationships and what to do in unhealthy relationships Teaches the social and emotional changes of puberty Provides assignments for students to talk with parents and other trusted adults about puberty
Begin to be sexually attracted to their peers Play games involving sexual behavior such as "Truth or Dare" or "Spin the Bottle"	Sexual activity, oral sex, intercourse, or coercion of others into sex acts Presence of STI Penetration of children, animals, dolls, or other objects	Support children in understanding they have both rights and responsibilities in their friendships and relationships. Provide age-appropriate sexuality information and basic information about sexual behaviors and sexually transmitted infections, etc.	Teaches respectful relationship skills Conducts role plays to practice showing respectful communication Explains the possible negative outcomes from risky sexual situations Discusses the benefits of postponing parenthood and sexual activity until adulthood
Use internet to chat online	Chatting with or planning to meet older online friends Sending nude or provocative images online	Educate children on the social and emotional aspects of puberty.	Teaches the social and emotional changes in puberty Includes role plays that explore the dangers of sexting or meeting people online
Begin to have a sexual orientation	Take sexual risks to try to conform Become depressed and suicidal	Explain that there are various sexual orientations such as straight, gay, and bisexual. Support children of any orientation.	Defines sexual orientation and gender identity and promotes respect for all individuals Promotes conversations with parents and other trusted adults to build a support system
Express curiosity about adult bodies Try to see people naked or undressing and look at pictures of people who are naked or partially clothed	Have excessive interest, knowledges, or language about sexualized behaviors	Provide age-appropriate information about puberty and sexual development. Teach about privacy and consent.	Teaches the proper terms for body parts Explains the functions of the reproductive system Teaches about consent and how to respect personal body space Answers student questions about puberty and sexual development
Watch or listen to media with sexual content such as TV, movies, music, web-sites, video games	Preoccupation with pornography	Encourage critical thinking and skills to differentiate fact from fiction in media images of sexuality. Provide accurate and reliable sources of information.	Teaches media literacy Provides information about puberty and sexual development from accurate and reliable sources
Masturbate in private as social norms become clearer	Persistent masturbation, especially in public	Explain that masturbation is a personal choice, and it's okay to do it or not to do it.	Provides model answers to provide when children ask about masturbation