

Discussing Sex with Young Children

As children grow, they tend to be curious—eager to learn about the whole, new, wonderful world around them. This includes being curious about sex, which is perfectly natural. Some parents, however, may be surprised or even shocked by what young children will ask, say, or do. But there is nothing bad or wrong about young children's curiosity about sex or their own genitals. Above all else, you'll want to encourage your child to always come to you with questions about sexuality. A child will get a lot of misinformation from friends and will need to get as much accurate information from a trusted source as possible.

Too much information

Keep in mind that you only need to answer the questions your child asks—no more and no fewer. There's an amusing story about a little boy who asked his parent, "Where did I come from?" The parent then went into a long-winded explanation about sexual matters and even used elaborate illustrations from anatomy texts. When finished, the parent said, "Does that answer your question?" The child replied, "No. You see, my friend Billy comes from Chicago. Where do I come from?" The point is: Don't rush into telling more than he or she really wants to hear.

When your child asks questions about sex, answer simply, honestly, and directly. Don't put children off by saying you're too busy or that they're too young to know about such things.

Here are four simple facts that your child may want to know:

1. Only women have babies, not men or children.
2. Babies grow to full size from a cell, which is a little bit like a "seed," and is about the size of a period at the end of a sentence. A man and a woman make a cell together.
3. A baby grows inside the mother, not in her stomach where the food is, but in a special place made for the baby called the uterus.
4. A baby comes out through a special opening in the mother called the vagina.

Questions about menstruation, intercourse, and what the father does generally come later. However, these kind of questions should be addressed before puberty, or as soon as your child asks.

Masturbation

In addition to asking about sex, young children sometimes touch or play with their genitals. This, too, is perfectly natural. Usually children will do it because they have an idle moment and it feels good, or because they have to go to the bathroom. If you happen to notice this, you might want to try to get them involved with some other activity as a substitute, such as

getting them involved with a toy, a game, or other form of play. Don't make a big deal about it, however.

Appropriate behavior

Never make your child feel embarrassed. You might want to talk to your child later about appropriate public behavior and private behavior. This may also be a good opportunity to discuss sexual abuse, too. Use the "swimsuit zone" to explain where "bad" touches may occur.

On the other hand, don't tell children that they'll hurt themselves or that they're bad when they masturbate. Don't tell them you won't love them any more or slap or tie their hands. The only real harm that occurs is if you make a young child feel ashamed or frightened when the child is only doing what comes naturally. Therefore, if your child masturbates, but seems happy and has many other interests, don't make a big fuss about it. It is perfectly reasonable, however, for you to teach your child that it should not be done in front of other people, and only in the bedroom. If your child masturbates more often than you are comfortable with, consult with your pediatrician.

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- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-33-ASK ME (1-800-332-7563). For TTY, the Healthphone number is 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit our Web site at www.kp.org.
- Contact your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care received from your child's physician or other medical professional. If your child has persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult your child's doctor.