

Children's Sexual Development

Every individual's sexual journey begins before birth and continues through puberty, adolescence, young adulthood, midlife, and elder years. Every journey is unique, yet we all grow physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, sexually, and spiritually. To understand a child's sexual development, we need to understand its relationship to other areas of human development.

The "5 to 7 shift" stage of kindergarten and first grade and the preadolescent stage of fourth, fifth, and sixth grades are critical years of development. Pamela Wilson's *When Sex Is the Subject* is an excellent companion book for parents/caregivers (see the Resources section). The following list, adapted from chapter 1 in Wilson's book, *How Children Learn They Are Sexual People*, describes how children grow and change psychologically and socially from birth to age 12.

BIRTH TO AGE 2

Infants come into the world completely dependent. They require that their caretakers provide for every need. When those needs are met consistently, babies learn to trust. Babies also learn how to be loved when they are held, stroked, patted, kissed, and caressed. Infancy is a very sensual period of life.

Children at this age may:

- explore body parts, including genitals
- begin to develop an attitude (either positive or negative) toward their own bodies
- experience genital pleasure (from birth, penises may have erections and vaginas may lubricate)
- be encouraged by family to develop gender identity
- learn expected gender roles

AGES 3 AND 4

After the second year of life, children are much more independent. They are talkative and curious about everything, including their bodies and the bodies of others. Three-year-olds commonly peek under one another's clothing, undress

their dolls, and check out the “bottoms” of pets and stuffed animals. By this age, they know they have a penis if they handle it to urinate. The vulva and clitoris are discussed less often.

Children at this age may:

- become aware of and very curious about gender/body differences
- masturbate
- play house or doctor or explore other forms of sex play with friends and siblings
- establish a firm internal gender identity
- have fun with bathroom humor
- mimic adult sexual behavior
- begin to repeat curse words
- be curious about their own origins: “Where did I come from?”

AGES 5 TO 8

Children in this age group have moved into the world beyond home and have begun to find their place in it. They realize they are starting to be judged on their own rather than their family’s merits. They begin to reorganize the way they see themselves and the way they behave to adapt to new social situations. Children bring varying levels of knowledge and skill to this period of life depending on their family and preschool experiences.

Children at this age may:

- continue sex play and masturbation
- be very curious about pregnancy and birth
- have strong same-sex friendships. Children learn different styles of communicating, often based on gender role expectations. Not every child fits into the boy/girl binary, but among those who do, girls tend to form close intimate friendships with one or two other girls. Boys usually play in larger groups; their play is often rougher and more oriented around mutual interests in activities.
- show strong interest in gender roles that are often stereotyped, regardless of parents/caregivers’ approach to child rearing
- have a basic sexual orientation by this time
- have a new awareness of authority figures; may see teachers as knowing more than parents/caregivers
- compare their own situations with those of peers; complain about lack of fairness
- begin to conform with peer-group style of dress and speech. At this age boys experience more pressure than girls to adhere to gender expectations in areas such as choice of toys, hobbies, clothing, and hairstyles.
- engage in name calling and teasing

AGES 9 TO 12

For many children, fourth or fifth grade marks the onset of puberty. At this age, children are intensely curious, constantly teasing, and interested in everything. At the early end of this stage, they approach sexuality information in a direct and scientific manner. However, since girls tend to mature faster than boys, they often seem to feel more nervous and to act more secretively during discussions about puberty, probably because the whole topic is closer to them than it is for boys.

Most children are very interested in music, clothes, and all that it takes to be “cool.” Some even have someone they have a crush on, whom they see at school and talk to on the phone.

Children at this age may:

- enter puberty. Gender may influence whether children view puberty positively or negatively.
- desire more privacy
- experience emotional ups and downs
- develop romantic crushes on friends, older teens, music and television idols, or sometimes teachers and counselors
- continue to attach importance to same-sex friends
- feel awkward and wonder, “Am I normal?”
- masturbate to orgasm
- be strongly influenced by peer group, but parents/caregivers remain the major source of values
- continue to learn society’s expectations about appropriate behavior for boys and girls. Girls, more than boys, experience increased pressure to conform to gender roles. They may avoid academic achievement, for example, preferring to base their popularity on appearance, personality, or possessions.
- begin to penetrate the mysteries of the adult world by using sexual language and enjoying romantic and sexual fantasies
- face decisions about sex and drugs
- initiate sexual intercourse as early as age 12

