

Parents can be reluctant to think about a young child's sexuality- we like to think of children as innocent and tend to associate sex with loss of innocence. And appropriately so: sex is a physical activity that should not be part of children's lives whereas sexuality is a basic part of who we are. It involves feelings, values and relationships as well as intimacy and love. The development of sexuality is a lifelong process starting at birth, which is when parental responsibility for sexuality education begins.

No one-off birds and bees talk can possibly cover the issue. Children's learning about their sexuality will be ongoing and will arise from the ways parents react to them and their bodies, the way adults talk about themselves and relate to their partner and the ways they show love to their children. Specific discussions about issues of sexuality can arise naturally from children's questions or comments. However information about puberty and the changes it brings should be given before the age of eight to ensure you're in time.

It's important to understand that children's sexual behaviour does not have the same meaning and doesn't occur with the same thoughts and feelings as adult sexuality. Children are likely to experiment with a wide range of sensual experiences. Some will be initiated out of curiosity, others because they are imitating what they saw on TV or heard about from their friends. Children's sexual behaviour is likely to be playful, sensual, exciting and open. It doesn't involve sexual desire or eroticism. They may take off their clothes or rub up against you, their friend or furniture simply because it feels good.

If the behaviour is ongoing parents can prevent innocent curiosity from becoming problem behaviour by distracting onto another activity or gently setting limits without shaming the child. What you do and say, your tone of voice, body language- all give children messages about their sexuality.

Children are sensual beings who must receive loving parental touch both for comfort and in order to have a sense of their own body. Before their first year is past they need to have formed a close bond with one or more people and will be experimenting with a wide range of emotions. As can be seen from the developmental milestones chart receiving empathy is crucial to be able to later offer it to others. Children learn to show love and affection when older by what was given to them and will learn negotiation and decision making skills in the same way.

Naming a child's body parts as you wash them is one of the early ways to help develop a positive body image. Preschoolers learn their gender identity by identifying with a same sex parent or important other. Most will also try out behaviours traditionally associated with the opposite sex too and it's important to support and accept this rather than shame the child. Boys who bake cakes and play with dolls are learning crucial life skills just as are girls who climb trees and build their own toys.

Parents should not hesitate to consult others' expertise in the tough job of helping a child develop healthy sexuality. Adults struggling with sexual problems often discover during sex therapy that some of their crucial sexual developmental milestones were never reached in childhood. Lough and Saunder's book [From Birth to Puberty](#) provides an

excellent parental guide and Blank's [A Kid's First Book About Sex](#) is the best book I've ever seen for under 11's.

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