

Children and learning about sexuality



Learning about sexuality is just as important as any other learning. Children need to know about the sexual parts of the body, just as they do arms and legs. They need to feel good about their body and being themselves.

When parents talk openly with children about sexual matters they can give correct information and discuss family values. Children learn they can talk with you about sensitive things.

How children learn

Learning about sexuality means learning about bodies, babies, puberty, gender, feelings, respectful relationships and values. It is also about privacy and keeping safe.

- Children build their understanding of these things bit by bit as they grow and mature.
- They learn from many sources, including parents, family, the media, their school and peers.

Parents

Children learn from their parents whether you talk about sexual matters or not.

- When parents show care and respect for each other and other people, children learn these values.
- If they see adults 'putting down', making fun of, disrespecting or being hurtful to the opposite sex, they can feel unhappy about who they are. They can become afraid of, or not respect a particular gender.

Media

From a young age children are influenced by the media including TV, movies, video games, social media, websites, magazines and billboards.

- They see lots of sexualised images and examples of what it means to be a girl, boy, man or woman and how they should act. This can make them feel unhappy about their body and who they are.
- Sometimes children see sexual violence or other sexual behaviours which can worry them.

Schools

Most early childhood services and schools teach children about their bodies. They teach the correct names for sexual parts of the body, which makes it easier for children to talk about their body. They also teach children how to ask for help if something doesn't seem right or they don't feel safe.

Children benefit when parents talk easily and openly about sexual matters in ways that suit their age and development. It builds children's confidence and helps protect them from sexual abuse.

Why talk with children about sexuality?

How you approach talking with children about sexuality can be influenced by what you think and feel about your own body and sexuality, what your parents said and did, as well as your culture or religion.

It is important to talk with children because it:

- is a chance to give accurate, balanced information. Children who have good sexuality education:
 - make healthier choices and delay having sex
 - have fewer unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections
- helps children cope with puberty if they know what to expect and can talk with you about it
- helps protect them from sexual abuse. Children learn to recognise when they don't feel safe and to tell you or another trusted person. If they get the message that sex and bodies are 'secret' they may not say if something worries them
- strengthens your relationship and builds trust. Children are more likely to come to you with any concerns
- helps children feel good about who they are
- helps them work out their values
- builds empathy and respect for difference in others
- can make life easier for children who don't fit gender stereotypes. Challenging expectations can give a broader view of boys, girls and gender identity and support children's sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Learning about sexuality is important for all children, including those living with disability or learning difficulties, or who have experienced trauma. Seek professional support if you need it.

Tips for talking with children

- Start talking in age-appropriate ways when children are young. Starting early will make it easier when children become teenagers.
- Be relaxed and open so it becomes just like talking about any other topic.
- Listen to your child and try not to lecture.
- Take opportunities as they arise to have many small conversations over time. Don't wait to have the 'one big talk'.
- Sharing age-appropriate books or brochures or finding out what their school teaches about sexual health can be good ways to start conversations at home.

**Be approachable and unshockable.
Let children know this is a topic you
are happy to talk about.**

In the early years

- Use the correct names for parts of the body when your child is young – penis, testes, vagina, vulva, bottom, breasts – just as you would for arms and legs. The words become familiar to children with no shame or embarrassment. They have the words they need to ask questions or talk about things that worry them.
- Try to find out what they know before giving information.
- Give small amounts of information that suit their age and development. An honest, simple explanation is often all young children need.
- Be willing to talk about topics more than once. Children often want to hear the same thing many times until they fully understand.
- From a young age children are curious about where they came from. They may ask many questions about babies. It can help to find out why they are asking so you can give information that suits their understanding.



- You could say something like ‘Babies start as a tiny egg and grow in a special place called the uterus inside their mother’. This is often all children want to know for a while.
- Four and five year olds can understand that you need a sperm (like a seed) from a man and an ovum (like a tiny egg) from a woman to make a baby.
- You could tell older children that ‘The sperm came from Dad’s penis and the egg from Mum’s ovaries. Sometimes because Mum and Dad love each other, they kiss and cuddle and Dad puts his penis inside Mum’s vagina. Not all sperm find an egg to make into a baby – only special ones like the one that made you’.
- If children have come into your family in other ways, such as through adoption, assisted reproductive technology, or donated egg or sperm they have a right to know their story from a young age too. (See Parent Easy Guide ‘Donor conception: telling your child’.)

Knowing the correct names for sexual parts of the body helps children talk about their body and makes them less vulnerable to abuse.

In the primary school years

- Puberty can start as early as 8 years of age and often by 10 or 11 years. It is important children have information about the physical and emotional changes before they happen, eg periods, erections, wet dreams.
- Children develop at different rates and can feel self-conscious if they seem different from their peers. Let them know there is a wide range of ‘normal’ and help them feel confident and happy about being themselves.
- At 9 or 10 years some children may start to feel attracted to another child. Talk about friendships and getting along with their peers – it will be their main concern at this age.

- Some children and young people are attracted to others of the same gender or to multiple genders. This can make them feel different, confused and alone. Talking about diversity of sexual attraction, healthy relationships and feelings in an inclusive way will help them feel accepted and that they can talk with you whatever their feelings.
- Take time to explore children’s understanding of gender and diversity. Encourage them to question what they see and hear in the media, eg how do the boys/girls/men/women look and act? What message does it give? Are the TV versions of body image, love, men and women real? What about people who don’t fit stereotypes?

Talk about relationships and feelings. Focus on respect, care and making good decisions that keep them and others safe.

Online

- Be aware of what children are viewing online and whether it is age-appropriate. They may come across sexual material on phones, tablets or computers. There may be pornography, ‘sexting’ (sending sexual images) or bullying, which can harm, scare or worry them.
- The best protection is when children know they can tell you. You can solve problems together and work out ways to keep them safe.
- If children visit friends’ homes it can help to discuss internet access with the other parents.

If children don’t ask

- If children don’t ask about sexual matters it doesn’t mean they’re not interested. They may be getting the message you are not keen to talk about these things. You will have to be the one to bring it up.



- If children don't want to talk, or say they already know about it, you could say that talking about these things can be uncomfortable, eg 'When I was young no one spoke to me about sexuality. It's really important and I want us to be able to talk about it'. Let them know they can talk to you any time.
- Find books or brochures on topics such as puberty that children can read when they are ready or to start conversations.

Talking with girls and boys

- It is important to talk with both girls and boys and that men and women are involved in this type of learning.
- In the past it has often been 'Mum's job'. However, it is important that dads or other trusted men are also seen as reliable sources of information. Children, especially boys, need to know it's OK for men to talk about these things.
- Sometimes mums can feel they don't understand enough about what's happening for their son, and dads can feel the same about their daughter. You can talk about things you feel comfortable with and find information for the parts you don't. Let your child know you really want to talk and will get back to them.
- Many single parents or those in same-gender relationships choose to link their child with other trusted adults they can talk to as well.

Caring touch

Caring touches, such as hugs and cuddles by close family members are very important for children to feel loved and learn to show love and affection. It helps them understand healthy touch and the meaning of consent.

Asking children things like 'Can I give you a hug?' helps them learn they have the right to say 'Yes' or 'No'. They learn to check with others before touching them.

Make sure children know they can say 'No' or 'Stop' to any touching they do not like or want, and that this should never be kept secret. Help them understand their whole body is private.

Children's behaviours

Children are naturally curious and from a young age are exploring and trying to make sense of their world. It is common for children to have behaviours related to sexual parts of the body. While parents can feel embarrassed or worried, these behaviours are usually part of children's learning and not of concern.

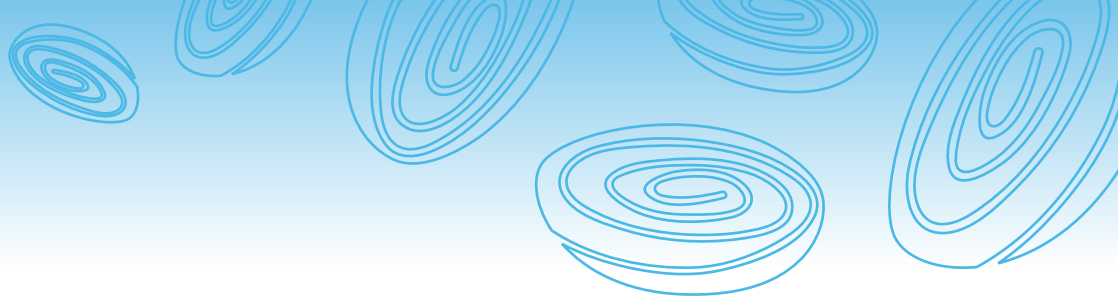
In the preschool years

- Babies learn about the world through touch. Just as they play with their fingers and toes, babies can play with their genitals when their nappy is off. This is part of their natural curiosity.
- Preschool children are often not shy about their bodies and enjoy being naked.
- They are curious and interested in looking at their own and others' naked bodies. As genitals are usually covered, they are especially interesting. They will notice that girls' and boys' bodies are different and may ask 'Why?' or 'What's that?'
- They are often interested in parents' or familiar adults' bodies. They might ask about them or want to touch them, eg in the shower or bath.
- Four year olds are very interested in what people do in bathrooms and toilets. They often joke about this and like to use any 'toilet words' they know.
- In the early years it is common for children to touch their genitals. They may do it because it feels good, or is comforting if they are worried. They may be finding out about their body, or simply need to go to the toilet.

In the primary school years

- By early primary school, children are more curious about adult sexuality and may ask about gender differences, babies, pregnancy and birth.
- They can enjoy using swear words, 'toilet' words or names for sexual parts of the body when telling stories or asking questions.





- They may have heard about sexual intercourse and like to talk about it, often using words they have heard from friends.
- In mid-primary school, children usually have a greater sense of privacy. They may be embarrassed about nudity and modest in front of parents or others.
- They can begin talking about sex, and tease and joke with peers. They may play games about kissing or pretend marriage.
- Games may also involve parts of the body. If children are found playing these games, they can feel embarrassed, especially if they see parents do not approve or are shocked. If asked to play something else they usually do.
- If you are not sure how to react, stay calm, take a deep breath and think about the message you want to give. What you say will depend on your child's age and maturity. If children are quite young, you could ignore it. For 4 and 5 year olds you could say 'It's OK to be curious, but people's bodies are private. It's not OK to touch other people's bodies without consent. If someone wants to touch you they must ask first and listen to your answer. It's OK to say 'No'. Tell them 'It looks like you are interested in finding out about bodies. Let's find a book that explains it'. Read it together to check their understanding. Make sure you don't embarrass or shame them.
- This type of play is usually OK if:
 - it is between friends of the same age, size and power
 - no one is being pushed to do something they don't want to do
 - they are not doing something children of that age don't usually know about
 - it does not take over all their play time, and they are easily re-directed.

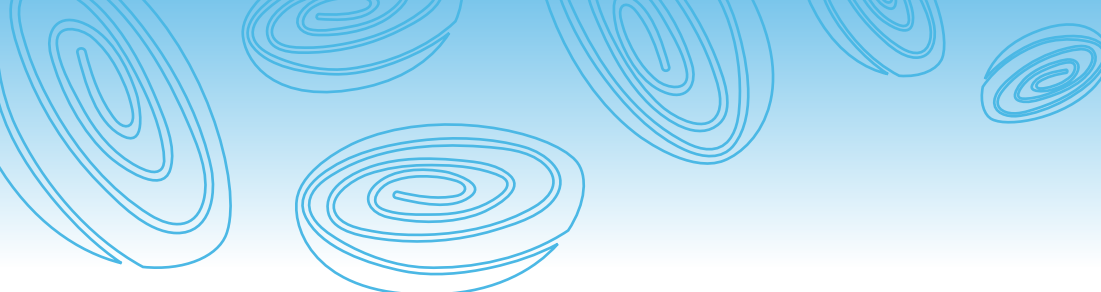
When to be concerned

Some things that might be cause for concern are when children:

- know more about sex than you would expect for their age or development
- talk and play games about sex much more than other children
- force others to touch their own or others' genitals. This may involve bribes, pressure or coercion
- make others play sex games, or play them with much younger children. They may hide this play from adults
- masturbate so much it affects their play or learning, or in public
- always draw the sexual parts of bodies
- are afraid or upset when people talk about their bodies or sex
- feel very anxious about being with a particular person for no obvious reason
- have unexplained redness, soreness or injury of the genital areas or mouth
- show signs of stress, such as a return to bedwetting, soiling their pants or hurting themselves. These indicate your child needs help.

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Children's sexual behaviours are usually a natural part of learning. If you are concerned, you could talk with your child's teacher. They can help you work out if the behaviour is usual for their age and work with you for the best outcomes. You could also talk with a doctor, counsellor or other health professional.
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Gender identity

Gender identity refers to a deep inner sense of who we are. This usually aligns with the biological sex we are assigned at birth.

- Young children might like to dress up in clothes of a different gender or play with toys that don't fit traditional gender stereotypes, eg girls playing with trucks, boys playing with dolls. Children may take on a gender role opposite to their own. Supporting this play helps all children explore the world and who they are.
- As gender identity becomes established children tend to play more with children of their own gender and prefer more stereotypical toys.

Gender diversity

- Some children identify as a different gender from the one typical of their biological sex.
- Gender diverse young people often say they knew their gender was different from a young age.
- Although society's understanding of gender diversity is growing rapidly, gender diverse people can still face rejection, harassment, discrimination and social isolation. This has a big impact on mental health and wellbeing.

If your child is questioning their gender

When a child questions their gender, some parents may not be surprised while others may deny, disbelieve or hope this will pass. Parents can worry about what this may mean for their child's future.

You can help your child by:

- making sure they know you love them and are proud of them
- listening and asking how you can help
- reassuring them there are other gender diverse children. They may wish to connect with a support group

- respecting their wishes regarding privacy and confidentiality
- using names, gender descriptions and pronouns of their choice, eg girl, boy, she, he, they
- not saying too much about any worries or concerns you may have
- being their advocate when needed, eg having their gender affirmed and supported at preschool, school or other services.

It is important to find good information and positive support for your child and yourself. Talking with others in the same situation can really help.

You could also connect with professionals experienced in gender diversity, especially if your child seems upset, confused or distressed.

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The love and acceptance of family and others helps support the health and wellbeing of gender diverse children and young people.

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Note: The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.



Want more information?

SHINE SA

SHINE welcomes and celebrates all people from diverse cultures, sexual orientations, genders, sexes and abilities. Fact sheets are free to download and may support discussion around puberty, menstruation and other sexual health topics <https://shinesa.org.au>

Healthy WA, Department of Health

'Talk soon. Talk often. A guide for parents talking to their kids about sex' www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/S_T/Talk-soon-Talk-often

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Sexual health information for children and preteens www.cafhs.sa.gov.au

Department for Education, Catholic Education SA and Association of Independent Schools SA

Guidelines for education and care settings on responding to problem sexual behaviour, 3rd edition, 2019. This lists normal, concerning and problem behaviours, and steps schools take to respond to and protect children www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/responding_to_problem_sexual_behaviour_in_children_and_young_people.pdf

True - Relationships and Reproductive Health, Queensland

Traffic lights brochure on problematic sexual behaviours in children <http://www.wbsass.com.au/themes/default/basemedia/content/files/Traffic-LightsBrochure.pdf>

Department of Human Services

ASK - Adults Supporting Kids
Help and support for parents and caregivers to keep children safe <https://adultssupportingkids.com.au/seeking-help/are-you-a-parent-extended-family-member-or-caregiver-supporting-kids>

National Office for Child Safety

For the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse and 'A guide for children and young people' (9 years and over), families and communities www.childsafety.pmc.gov.au

Keeping Safe: Child Protection Curriculum (KS:CPC)

Information and resources for parents/carers to help children and young people keep themselves safe www.education.sa.gov.au/parents-and-families/curriculum-and-learning/early-years/keeping-safe-child-protection-curriculum-information-parents-and-carers

eSafety Commissioner

Parent-friendly resource to help keep children safe online www.esafety.gov.au/parents

Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 551 800 anytime day or night
Phone and online support for children and young people 5-25 years <https://kidshelpline.com.au>

Uniting Communities Bfriend

Phone (08) 8202 5190 or email bfriend@unitingcommunities.org
Talk to someone about sexuality, gender identity or intersex status <https://www.unitingcommunities.org/service/community-support/lgbtiqa-support>

Women's and Children's Hospital Gender Diversity Service

Referrals accepted for any child or young person up to age 17 regarding gender identity concerns www.wch.sa.gov.au/patients-visitors/patient-support-services/gender-diversity

Transcend

Information, peer support and links to other services for families of transgender children <https://transcendaus.org/>

Raising Children Network

For information on talking with children and young people about sex and gender diversity www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100 for advice on child health and parenting

Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including 'Talking sex with young people', 'Young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual', 'Protecting children from sexual abuse', 'Donor conception: telling your child', 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2-12 years' www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Acknowledgement: Some content in this Guide was adapted with permission from 'Talk soon. Talk often: A guide for parents talking to their kids about sex'. Department of Health, Government of Western Australia, 2019 www.healthywa.wa.gov.au





**Government
of South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services
and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Phone: 08 8303 1660

Web: www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended
to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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