



The sexual development of children
0-18 years old



Rutgers

For sexual and reproductive health and rights

Should I be worried about my child playing doctors and nurses?

Is it normal for my adolescent child to search for sex on the internet?

What should I say if my child asks where babies come from?

This brochure describes the sexual development of children aged 0 to 18 years. It also contains examples of how you can help your child with this.

What is sexual development?

Children not only grow bigger, but also develop sexually. Sexual development is about more than just sexuality, though. It also includes love and friendship, finding out whether you are a boy or a girl, saying what you do and do not want, and feeling good.

What is sex education?

Sex education means helping your child during sexual development, from the day it is born. You can help children under the age of twelve to discover their bodies, feelings, what they do and do not want, and how to make friends. Children over the age of twelve can also use your help when making choices connected to sex.

Why are you important, as a parent?

The atmosphere at home has an effect on a child's sexual development. A cosy family setting and parents who support and take an interest in their child, offer the child a better basis for healthy sexual development. Children who feel safe and loved are usually more certain. And children often have questions: about their bodies, friendship and falling in love. If you provide information in an open and relaxed way, then your child will discover that it can talk to you about anything. Your child can also learn from you how to form relationships, as well as making good choices in this area. In other words: you set an example for your child.

Cosy family setting

Research has shown that children who grow up in a cosy family setting:

- wait longer before having sex for the first time
- protect themselves better from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections when they do have sex
- run less risk of being forced or forcing others to have sex
- are more able to say what they do and do not want in a relationship

Your role as a parent

- **Providing safety.** Cuddling your child and letting it know that you care make it feel safe, protected and loved. Cuddling also helps your child to discover what feels good.
- **Setting rules.** By setting rules, you can teach your child what is allowed and what not. For instance, not touching your penis or vagina while other people are present.
- **Sharing standards and values.** If you say what you think about certain things, then you can also teach your child to think about them. In many cases children then make your standards and values their own.
- **Offering space.** For your child to discover their own body and feelings.
- **Setting an example.** By showing how you deal with things yourself, like telling others your wishes and borders, you can set an example for your child.
- **Getting involved.** If you show interest in what your child does, then you let him or her know that you care. Your child will then be more likely to ask you questions or tell you their problems.
- **Providing information and answering questions.** By talking to your child about sexuality, you show that it is a subject that can be discussed. This also allows you to prepare your child, for puberty for instance.

0–4 years old

Discovering



Physical contact

Babies enjoy physical contact. They like to cuddle and be cuddled. This makes them feel safe and builds trust.



Discovering own body

Babies and toddlers discover their own bodies by looking and feeling. They also touch their own private parts. Some little boys can get an erection (stiff penis). This has nothing to do with excitement or sex. Touching their private parts can give a child a nice feeling, just like sucking their thumb does.



Curious about bodies

Toddlers are very curious about their own bodies, and other people's too. For instance, they want to know where their wee-wee comes from. And it is also a way of telling whether someone is a boy or a girl.



Dirty words

Some children think it is fun to shout out dirty words. The suddenly shout 'poo' or 'willy' again and again. They find this either funny or exciting, because they notice that these words make adults react.

Washing

Marcel: *How should I clean my two-year-old son's penis? Do I need to pull back his foreskin?*

You should wash his penis with warm water and a facecloth or flannel. Do not use soap. Also make sure that you clean the wrinkles. You do not need to pull back the foreskin of a boy this age. This is only possible after it has come loose from the tip, which happens at around the age of three to six years.

Hand down pants

Bouchra: *My three-year-old daughter often touches her vagina, or rubs herself back and forward against the chair. How can I break this habit?*

There is no need to stop her doing this, as it is normal behaviour. It either gives your child a nice feeling or relaxes her. This is not the same as the sexual excitement that adults feel. You could teach your daughter that she may do this when she is alone, but not while other people are present.

4–6 years old

Learning and playing



Learning rules

As children grow older, they learn better at home and at school how they 'should' behave, and what is allowed and what not. At this age, they learn that you should not run around naked or touch your penis while others are present.

Playing doctors and nurses

Young children like playing 'doctors and nurses' or 'father and mother'. By playing these games, they discover what bodies look like, and learn the differences between boys and girls.

Where do babies come from?

Children ask all sorts of questions, because they want to know everything. They might also ask how a baby gets inside a woman's belly. And how the baby comes out.

Boys' and girls' stuff

Children have their own ideas about how boys and girls are supposed to behave: girls like pink and playing with dolls, while boys act tough and play with toy cars. They may think it strange if another child does not fit these patterns. Occasionally, a child feels it would rather be the opposite sex. Although this often passes when they reach puberty, sometimes it does not. These are known as gender children.

Rules when playing games

Gloria: *My five-year-old son often plays doctors and nurses with a friend. Should I allow him to do so?*

Playing doctors and nurses can do no harm, as it is completely normal for children of this age. You should tell your child that there are a few rules, such as the ones below:

- You don't have to play doctors and nurses if you don't want to, even if everyone else is playing.
- Do not do anything that your playmate does not want.
- Do not poke anything in openings (mouth, ears, nose, vagina, bottom).
- Do not hurt each other.

Giving an answer

Stanley: *My four-year-old daughter wants to know where babies come from. What should I tell her?*

You could say something like: "One of daddy's seeds joins with one of mummy's eggs. And these grow into a baby, inside mummy's tummy. When the baby has grown big enough, it comes out through mummy's vagina." You can also tell your child more details, if they ask. Or you might prefer to use a picture book to explain.

6–9 years old

Already becoming exciting



Crushes

Children of this age can describe how it feels to be in love. Many of them have already been in love. This often just means that they like someone a lot. The difference between friendship, having a crush and really loving someone becomes clearer and clearer to them. A child may also fall in love with someone of their own sex.

Exciting spots

From around the age of seven years old, most children know that their private parts also have a sexual function. Because they are curious, they start looking at or even touching each other's private parts. They often do this when adults are not watching, because they know it is frowned upon.

Friendships

At this age, children prefer to play with other children of their own sex. Boys do typically boyish things, act tough and really want to win. Girls do really girly things and often play in pairs, which is all about cooperating and being kind. If boys and girls do play together, then they often find it exciting.

Comparing with others

Children become more and more aware of other people's opinions. They often compare themselves with others, or with the way they would like to be. This applies to their bodies, too. Girls usually want to be slimmer, and boys taller. This may make them feel uncertain about or dissatisfied with themselves.

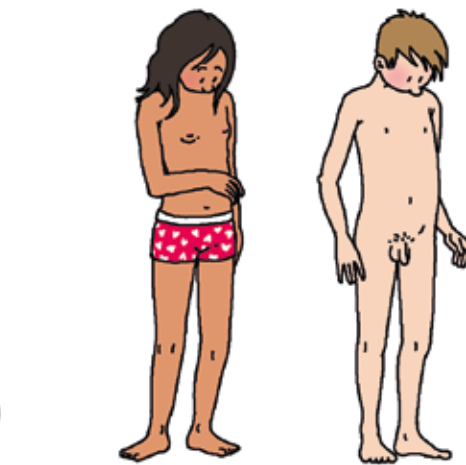
Gay?

Asha: My six-year-old son says that he is going to marry his friend when he grows up. Does this mean that he is homosexual?

This may be the case, but at the same time it may not. If children of this age say that they are later going to marry a friend, it just means that they really like their friend. He or she might just turn round tomorrow and say that they are going to marry you, or even the next-door neighbour, instead.

9–12 years old

Almost adolescent



Shame

Children start feeling more ashamed of their naked bodies. They now prefer to shower or get undressed on their own, rather than in company. It may also depend on who the other people are. Some children find it no problem to undress in front of others at home, for instance, but are not keen to do so in the gym at school.

First date

At this stage, some children start 'dating' for the first time, usually with someone in their class. They often do no more than stand together at break times, or do things together with a group of friends. At this age, they hardly even touch each other. Nor do they spend very much time alone with one another.

Curious about sex

Sex becomes interesting to children from around the age of ten. Some want to know everything about sex, while others think it is dirty. Some children start asking more questions about sexuality, while others do not want to talk about it, or get embarrassed if someone else does.

Changing body

Puberty is on its way, and it often comes to girls a little sooner than to boys. Physical changes and swings in feelings and emotions may make children feel uncertain. For instance, they might start wondering whether their body is actually attractive or even normal.

Preparing for puberty

John and Lisa: *Should we start preparing our nine-year-old son and daughter for puberty?*

When your children reach this age, you can tell them that their bodies are going to start changing gradually. If you do so, then they will not be so surprised when pubic hair and armpit hair, breasts and labia start growing, or when they have their first ejaculation or period. You should explain that their feelings might also change during puberty. If you find it hard to talk about these things, then there are good booklets available, which children can read themselves. Tips are contained at the back of this brochure.

Porn

Wendy: *My eleven-year-old son watches porn. What should I do about this?*

Especially boys of this age start taking an interest in sexual images. You should not really worry about this. It is important to tell your son that porn is sex between actors, which is only meant to excite other people. And explain two people actually making love is really very different. In that case, you pay attention to what you both enjoy, because making love also means fondling and being sweet to each other. You might also choose to look at sexual images together, then ask what your child thinks of it. And then, you should also say what you think yourself.

12-15 years old

Puberty



Wanting to be independent

When young people reach puberty, they want to do their own things more and more. They think that they can do it all themselves, and stop listening to their parents so much. So, you might find that you start arguing more with your child. But, never forget: you are still very important to him or her.

Friends become even more important

It becomes more and more important for your child to have friends and to belong to a certain group. At the same time, young people are very sensitive to rejection and criticism. This makes them vulnerable to pressure from their circle of friends.

Social media

Young people spend a lot of time online. They get in touch and also flirt with each other on social media. They also start searching online for information about sex.

Sexual attraction

Many young people fall in love or feel sexually attracted to someone. This could be someone of either the opposite or the same sex. The last of these two possibilities can cause confusion. Lots of young people start kissing at around this age.

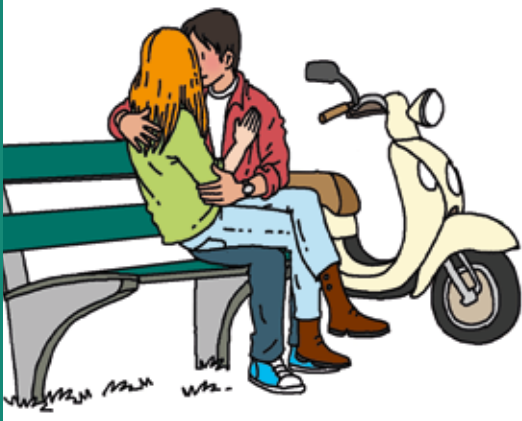
Show interest

Pascal: *My son has turned fourteen, and has started doing his own thing more and more. I do not mind this, but I do want to know what he gets up to.*

There are lots of ways to show you are interested in your son: Ask him during dinner how his day was, and about the people he spends time with. Also ask how he is, and what he does online. Even though your son is becoming independent, you can still show interest. This also lets him know that you are still there if he needs you.

15–18 years old

Almost an adult



Practicing relationships

Many young people start relationships at this age. They flirt, date, end relationships and learn how to deal with heartbreak. Some young people do not feel the need to start a relationship, and prefer to wait a while or simply never fall in love at all.

Wishes and borders

Young people around this age still find it hard to say what they like and where their borders are when flirting with and dating someone. This can lead to misunderstandings and unpleasant sexual experiences.

Sexual experiences

Many young (gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual) people have their first sexual experience at this age, such as masturbating, touching and fondling, fingering and wanking. Around half of all young people are aged seventeen or over when they have sexual intercourse for the first time.

Out of the closet

Young people who discover that they are gay, bisexual or lesbian, also start admitting that they are. It often takes some time before they also tell the outside world (come out of the closet) though. It is important that they have the support of their parents and friends when they do this, as it is a very intense time in their lives.

Sex messaging

Suzanne: *My fourteen-year-old daughter sometimes sends sexy pictures to her boyfriend. How should I react to this behaviour?*

Sending sexy pictures to people on the internet and social media is also known as sex messaging. The danger of sending a sexy picture or film is that other people could also get hold of it, who you would prefer did not. Your daughter should stop sending this kind of pictures, if she does not want other people to see them. And it is important that she does not share pictures or films of other people either.

Talking about standards and values

Ahmed: *I do not want my sixteen-year-old daughter to start having sex. How can I stop her?*

Forbidding it is usually not the best solution. There is a risk that she will then have sex sneakily, while she is not properly prepared to do so. It is better that you explain the way you think and why. If children understand your reasons, then they are more likely to copy them. Keep talking about the subject with her.

How should I start talking about relationships and sex?

The tips below may make it easier for you to talk to your child about relationships and sex.

1 Answer questions

If a parent does not answer a question about sex, then your child may start thinking that it is not right to speak about it. Give answers that match your child's stage of development. And if you cannot think of an answer straight away, then simply say so, but promise your child that you will give an answer later, and keep your promise.

2 Use an experience as a reason to start a conversation

It is often much easier to start a conversation if your child has just experienced something. If one of the mothers in your area is pregnant for instance, then you can use this as an excuse to tell your child about pregnancy and babies. If a girl on TV gets called 'sexy', then you can explain what people mean when they use this word.

3 Pick the right moment

If you are already doing something together with your child, then it is usually easier to start talking than when you have to sit down and face each other. For instance, when you are driving somewhere in the car, taking the dog for a walk or cooking a meal together. This helps make sexuality an 'ordinary' subject to talk about.

4 Ask your child questions

You can find out how much your child knows and what they think about sex by asking him or her questions. Ask questions that begin with the word 'who', 'what', 'where', 'how' or 'which'.

Choice of words

There are lots and lots of words for things such as private parts and making love. You should choose the ones which you and your child are both comfortable with, but which clearly say exactly what you are talking about.

5 Use a book

If you find it hard to talk to your child about sex, then you may prefer to read them a book. Or just leave the book lying around at home for them to find. If your child is curious, then they will start reading it themselves.

6 What would you do if ...?

You can help prepare your child to deal with tricky situations by asking them how they would react. You can best do so by asking: "What would you do if...?" It is important to let children think up their own answers in different situations.

And last, but not least ...

Giving sex education is the job of school and parents

This brochure clearly explains that not just school, but parents too are responsible for sex education. As a parent, you are the person that your child trusts most, and you are also their most shining example. You should also find out what your child is told at school about relationships and sexuality. You can then talk more about these subjects together at home.

Sex education is not just a job for mothers

Fathers are just as important as mothers when it comes to giving children sex education. They can tell their daughters all about boys. And they can explain to sons how a man's body actually works. Of course, mothers can also tell their sons all about girls, and explain to daughters how a woman's body actually works.

Talking to your children about sexuality will not make them have sex sooner

In fact, children who are properly informed are usually less curious about sex. And when they do eventually decide to have sex, they are more likely to do so safely (using the pill and condoms). Children who know little about sex are more likely to experiment, because they are often very curious.

Young children already think about love, relationships and sexuality

Babies and toddlers discover their own bodies, while pre-school children can fall in love, and boys and girls start chatting with each other from the age of eight. So, young children also think about love, relationships and sexuality, even though they do so in a different way to older children. As a parent, it is important that you take proper care in helping your child to develop.

References

Books by Robie Harris:

- *It's Not the Stork!*
- *Who Has What?*
- *It's So Amazing!*
- *It's Perfectly Normal*

Books by Peter Mayle:

- *Where Did I Come From?*
- *What's Happening to Me?*

- *The Family Book* (book by Todd Parr)
- *An Exceptional Children's Guide to Touch* (book by Hunter Manasco)

About Rutgers

Everyone should have the opportunity to experience sexuality voluntarily, safely and pleasantly. And we pursue this aim with great passion.

For numerous decades, the name Rutgers has been synonymous with open, candid and positive sex education in the Netherlands. Nowadays we mainly support professionals in the care and education sectors in discussing sexuality with their target groups. We acquire knowledge and develop effective methods on the basis of research. Furthermore, we utilise our knowledge and expertise to influence policy-makers.

Rutgers' success is also evident in other countries. This inspires us to cooperate with organisations throughout the world in improving sexual health and offering people freedom of choice in relationships, sexuality and the decision whether or not to have children.