

Valley Oak Children's Services



Early Childhood Education Services

YOUNG CHILDREN AND SEXUALITY

A child's growing sexuality probably causes more confusion than any other area of child development. We wonder what is normal, how much we should tell children and at what age. Many of us are concerned about presenting information in a way that will satisfy a child's curiosity and at the same time, instill in them the values we wish them to have. We hope that our children will link their sexuality with love and intimacy as they grow.

Children begin to develop their sexuality at birth. They experience a normal and pleasurable interest in their bodies and spontaneous genital exploration may begin as early as four months. Toddlers are likely to show an interest in differences between the sexes, different body parts and bathroom activities. Preschool children will ask those innocent (and sometimes startling!) questions that exemplify their constant and natural curiosity about everything in the world around them.

It may be difficult to feel comfortable responding to a preschooler's questions about the human body, its parts and functions. It may help to look at these questions like you would any others. Answering, "Where did I come from?" is not that much different than answering, "Why are leaves green?" or even, "How did that tall tree grow from that tiny seed?" It helps to be open and natural and to keep focused on the facts. Provide only as much information as is needed to answer the child's specific question. It is important to use correct anatomical terms and to avoid long explanations. Children at the preschool level are able to understand information that is

presented simply and clearly, and many times, a simple answer is all that is needed. If a child feels reassured that you are available to answer her questions, she will feel comfortable coming to you whenever something is puzzling or new.

As you begin discussions about sex and reproduction with your preschooler, keep in mind that it isn't necessary at this point to delve into the multitude of moral issues that surround sexuality. Children at this age are generally concerned with resolving the mysteries that they can actually see; primarily pregnancy and anatomical differences. When questions about conception and intercourse do come up, try to respond with simple, honest and straightforward labels and answers. These topics will be much more abstract for the preschool child and it would be easy for an adult to explain too much for too long. Avoid long lectures and rest assured, children will want to return to you for clarification of points that may puzzle or confuse them as their ability to think and ponder increases and they are able to absorb more information.

As in other areas of a child's normal development when questions arise, it is sometimes helpful to learn what a child already knows or believes to be true. The adult who asks, "What do you think?" when asked a question, learns what the child knows or thinks she knows. This situation creates an opportunity to address the child's level of understanding and gently correct misinformation. It is important that the child is not made to feel silly or foolish for her ideas. The child's ideas can be used as starting point

and the adult can guide the conversation to include correct information and reassure the youngster that her questions are valid. Books can be used as a tool to either bring forth a child's questions or help to illustrate your answers.

People like to do things that bring them pleasure and children are no exception. Children will touch their genitals because it feels good. Most experts now consider masturbation a normal part of sexual behavior and believe that a child will not harm herself from this kind of touching. Some people do not approve of this particular behavior for religious or other reasons and their views need to be respected. Others, while respecting the child's curiosity and right to touch their own bodies, feel that children need to know that this touching behavior is personal and stress the need for privacy. It may be necessary to gently remind a child that there are some things that are done in private and this kind of touching is one of those things. Scolding children about touching their bodies may make them feel that their bodies are "bad" or "dirty" and angry reactions may be more harmful than the sex play itself. Rather than reprimand, you may want to suggest another game or activity to the child. Redirection is usually appropriate and effective. If masturbation becomes excessive or interferes with other activities, there may be a physical or emotional problem with the child that requires attention. Similarly, if a child exhibits unusually sophisticated behavior and/or knowledge of a sexual nature, there is a possibility that the child may need professional assistance.

Adults may feel unsure of how to react when they discover children examining each other's

bodies. It is important to be honest about how you feel in this situation. If you are uncomfortable with this behavior, redirecting children to another area without punishing or shaming them is usually effective. One parent may respond with, "I am not comfortable with this behavior. I need you to put your clothes on and then I will help you find something else to do." Another may feel this type of exploration is an opportunity to acknowledge the child's curiosity, teach the child the correct labels for their body parts, remind the children that their bodies are private, and at that point, redirect the children to another activity. This parent may say something like, "I understand that you are curious about how you and Willy are made differently. Willy has a penis and you have a vagina. However, you do need to keep your hands on your own body. Your body is private. We can find a book that tells us about bodies and how they work if you want to learn more." In this instance, keep it simple and remember that telling them more than they're asking to know will probably be confusing. Also, it is a good idea to plan so that private or enclosed areas are well supervised so that opportunities for sexual exploration between children are kept to a minimum.

Those of us who live and work with children can help them to incorporate a healthy sexuality into a secure and confident whole person. We can offer them straightforward and honest answers to their questions. At the same time, we can teach them about privacy and encourage them to approach sexuality with an emphasis on love and intimacy as they leave their childhood years behind. What is most important is to be sensitive to this child, supportive, and available for discussion on any topic that sparks their curiosity.