



Written By

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Aim

Children might be very curious about bodies. They might explore their own body and the bodies of others by looking or touching. Sexual behaviour in children might be a bit confronting, especially the first time you see it. Touching, looking and talking about bodies is mostly a normal and healthy part of a child's development. If you know what childhood sexual behaviour is normal, it can help you decide how to respond.

Normal preschool sexual behaviour: what it looks like

Children may:

- touch their genitals, or masturbate
- kiss and hold hands with other children
- show their genitals to other same-age children and look at theirs – 'Show me yours and I'll show you mine'
- play mummies and daddies, or doctors and nurses
- copy behaviour they have seen – for example, pinching a bottom
- use slang language for toileting and sexual activities.

Gender identity

- By 3 years of age, most children can say if they are a boy or a girl. By 6 or 7 they understand that this does not usually change.
- Young children might like to dress up in clothes of the other gender or play with toys that don't fit with gender stereotypes, e.g. girls playing with trucks, boys playing with dolls. They can be trying out what it is like to be a boy/girl, or be involved in fantasy play that is no more important to them than any other play. They may not view it in the same way as adults.
- As gender identity becomes more established, children tend to play more with children of their own gender and prefer more gender stereo-typed toys.
- A small number of children will identify as the opposite gender to their biological sex in an ongoing way. Love and acceptance from parents and educators help all children feel good about their unique identity.

What this behaviour means

This is normal and typical behaviour for Preschool children. Children might do these things because:

- it feels good
- they are learning about touch and social rules
- they are curious about the differences between boys' and girls' bodies
- they are working out how bodies work
- they are trying to understand families and relationships
- they are testing limits to see what words are OK to use.

How to respond to normal sexual behaviour in children

It is natural and positive for children to be curious about their bodies and that of the opposite sex. Do not let your adult attitudes about sexuality affect the attitudes of the children. Child sexuality is not dirty but very natural. Adult intervention may confuse the child and cause unnecessary guilt.

How you react is important, but responses depend on values. Some parents are happy with this type of behaviour, and others aren't. Educators must respect the family's rights in regards to their views and values on child sexuality, with parents being supports if and only when necessary.

If educators witness sexual behaviour, they should remain calm, distract the child or find another activity. You could talk to the child about what behaviour and games are appropriate for Preschool. For example, you could explain that at Preschool children play with their clothes on. If children are exploring other bodies (as opposed to observing), explain that their bodies are their own. If masturbation is a problem, redirect the child's attention without making a fuss about it.

Talk with children and answer their questions openly and honestly, but also at a level they can understand. For example, you could talk about public and private body parts, how girls and boys are different or ways of talking about bodies. You could say, 'I noticed that you're curious about boys' bodies and girls' bodies. Maybe we can find a book about bodies that we can read together'.

When talking with children, use the proper words for body parts – vagina, vulva, breasts, penis, testicles and so on. This helps children learn about their body and tell you clearly about any questions or concerns they have. Open and honest talk about sex and bodies from early on will help guide a child's behaviour now and lay the groundwork for future talks about sexual development, respectful relationships and sexuality.

Any display of childhood sexuality will be recorded by staff and discussed with parents. Confidentiality will be maintained. If educators suspect a child is at Risk of Harm refer to Child Protection Policy and Procedures.

Resources & References

Raising Children's Network

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/preschoolers/development/sexual-development/sexual-behaviour-preschoolers>

Children and learning about sexuality

<https://www.education.sa.gov.au/parenting-and-child-care/parenting/parenting-sa/parent-easy-guides/children-and-learning-about-sexuality-parent-easy-guide>

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