

Child & Adolescent Sexual Development

Ages 5–7

Commonly Observed Behaviors

- Curious about body parts and differences between boys and girls.
- Asking simple questions about pregnancy, babies, and where they come from.
- Using silly or giggly talk about private parts.
- Occasional exploration with same-age peers (e.g., “playing doctor”), usually brief, mutual, and based on curiosity.
- Increased desire for privacy when using the bathroom or changing clothes.
- Beginning to understand social rules around modesty.
- May touch their own genitals as a form of self-soothing, usually in private.
- Developing stronger sense of gender identity (“I’m a boy/girl,” “I like to wear…”).

Red Flags

- Sexual play that involves children much younger or shows large age differences.
- Repeated, intrusive, or aggressive sexual behaviors.
- Sexual language, play, or knowledge that seems far beyond what is typical for age.
- Frequent public masturbation that does not lessen with guidance.
- Strong shame, secrecy, or distress around sexual curiosity.
- Sexual behavior used as a way to express anger, dominance, or trauma.
- Signs of possible abuse or exposure to sexual content (sudden fearful behavior, drastic changes in mood, unexplained sexual knowledge).

How Adults Can Support

- Use correct names for body parts and answer questions simply and honestly.
- Teach basic rules about privacy, consent, and boundaries in age-appropriate ways.
- Reinforce that curiosity is normal, but there are safe/appropriate places to explore and ask questions.
- Encourage respect for others’ personal space.
- Monitor media and online exposure to prevent early access to sexual material.
- Respond calmly to questions or behaviors to avoid creating shame.
- Seek professional help if behaviors are persistent, aggressive, or involve much younger children.

More Information

- [Children | NCSBY](#)
- [Information by Age - Parents | Teaching Sexual Health](#)
- [Ages & Stages of Healthy Childhood Sexual Development - Puberty Curriculum](#)
- [Tip Sheet: Warning Signs of Possible Sexual Abuse In A Child's Behaviors | Stop It Now](#)
- [Sexual Assault Centres, Crisis Lines, And Support Services](#)

Child & Adolescent Sexual Development

Ages 8–10

Commonly Observed Behaviors

- Increasing curiosity about how bodies work, including puberty changes.
- Asking questions about reproduction, relationships, and “where babies come from.”
- Beginning of early puberty for some — breast budding, body odor, first pubic hair.
- Interest in friendships and forming stronger bonds with peers.
- Same-age crushes may begin (wanting to sit next to or spend time with someone special).
- Experimenting with gender roles (how boys/girls are “supposed” to act).
- Giggles, jokes, or silliness about sex-related words or body parts.
- Seeking more privacy in bathroom or changing clothes.
- Masturbation may occur, typically in private, as a form of self-soothing or curiosity.

Red Flags

- Sexual play or talk involving children much younger.
- Aggressive, coercive, or forceful sexual behaviors.
- Sexual knowledge or behavior far beyond what is typical for their age.
- Excessive or public masturbation that does not lessen with redirection.
- Strong secrecy, shame, or distress related to sexual curiosity.
- Using sexual behavior to express anger, control, or power.
- Persistent sexualized play that interferes with normal friendships or school.
- Signs of exposure to sexual material (pornography) or possible abuse (fearful behaviors, unexplained gifts, drastic mood changes).

How Adults Can Support

- Answer questions about puberty and reproduction with honesty and age-appropriate detail.
- Reassure them that body changes happen at different times for everyone.
- Teach boundaries, privacy, and respect for others’ bodies.
- Encourage open conversations without shame or embarrassment.
- Monitor media and internet use to limit exposure to inappropriate content.
- Support healthy peer friendships and self-esteem.
- Seek professional help if concerning patterns or red flags appear.

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Child & Adolescent Sexual Development

Ages 11–13

Commonly Observed Behaviors

- Puberty begins (menstruation, voice changes, growth spurts, body hair, etc.).
- Increased curiosity about bodies and sexuality.
- Masturbation is common as a form of self-exploration.
- Developing crushes, infatuations, and same-age attractions.
- Beginning to express interest in dating, usually in group settings.
- Increased focus on body image, appearance, and fitting in with peers.
- Talking or joking about sex with peers; giggling or embarrassment about sexual topics.
- Exploring sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Seeking privacy (closing doors, wanting more personal space).

Red Flags

- Forcing or coercing peers into sexual behavior.
- Sexual contact with children much younger or much older.
- Sexual knowledge or behavior that seems far beyond developmental stage.
- Frequent, public, or disruptive sexual behavior.
- Distress, shame, or secrecy surrounding sexual curiosity that interferes with daily life.
- Use of sex or sexual talk in ways that are aggressive, degrading, or harmful.
- Risky or compulsive behaviors (e.g., sharing explicit images online, repeated unsafe experimentation).
- Signs of sexual abuse or exploitation (fearful behavior, unexplained gifts, drastic behavior changes).

How Adults Can Support

- Offer clear, accurate, age-appropriate information about puberty and sexual health.
- Normalize body changes and reassure them that development is different for everyone.
- Talk openly about consent, respect, and boundaries early.
- Encourage healthy friendships and positive peer interactions.
- Be approachable — let them know questions about sex and relationships are welcome.
- Keep an eye out for unsafe online behavior or exposure to inappropriate material.
- Seek professional support if concerning patterns emerge.

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Child & Adolescent Sexual Development

Ages 14–17

Commonly Observed Behaviors

- Increased interest in dating and forming romantic relationships.
- Curiosity about sex and masturbation.
- Crushes, fantasies, and clearer awareness of sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Desire for privacy and independence.
- Experimentation with consensual intimacy (kissing, touching, sometimes intercourse).
- Talking with peers about relationships and sex.
- Concern with body image, attractiveness, and fitting in.
- Occasional, short-term sexual risk-taking may occur.

Red Flags

- Forcing, pressuring, or manipulating others sexually.
- Sexual activity with much younger children or older adults.
- Disregarding consent or personal boundaries.
- Compulsive or high-risk sexual activity (e.g., repeated unprotected sex, multiple partners with no safety).
- Advanced sexual knowledge or behavior not typical for age.
- Ongoing secrecy, shame, anxiety, or distress related to sexuality.
- Using sex to cope with stress, trauma, or low self-esteem.
- Signs of exploitation or abuse (sudden sexual knowledge, unexplained gifts, fear of certain people/places).

How Adults Can Support

- Provide accurate, age-appropriate sexual health information.
- Encourage open, judgment-free conversations.
- Reinforce respect, consent, and healthy boundaries.
- Support positive body image and self-esteem.
- Monitor for unsafe or harmful behaviors online and offline.
- Seek professional guidance if red flags appear.

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