

# Sexual Health and Safety



Most parents want to know how to discuss children's bodies and how to respond to their early interest in "sexual" play. The positive messages you send will lead them to feel proud of their bodies and have healthy self-esteem.

## TALKING ABOUT BODIES

It's a good idea to use the correct names for body parts, including genitals. Children notice if only certain parts of their bodies receive special names. Sometimes privates aren't named at all! This can cause confusion or shame. Proper terms for body parts may feel embarrassing at first. But if you use them right from the start, it will get more comfortable. Correct names can also help your child feel "ownership" of their body. They learn that it's okay to talk about their bodies. They also know the words to tell you if there is any unwanted touch or abuse.

## DEVELOPING GENDER IDENTITY

Gender identity is knowing yourself as a boy or a girl. However, over the past 10 years, gender identity has become more fluid. There are now new definitions beyond these two categories. Some people consider themselves nonbinary which can be both or neither male nor female.

Most children notice the differences between boys and girls sometime around 2 years old. Over the next several years, your child will probably decide they are either a boy or girl. For many children, early gender roles seem rigid. A girl may refuse anything that isn't pink. A boy may think that a woman with short hair is a man. Their understanding will grow as they mature. You can help your child understand gender better by sharing stories about men and women in uncommon roles. You can also offer a variety of toys for your child to play with and model respect for both sexes.

Toddlerhood is full of exploration and imagination. Many children engage in playful dress-up activities and role-plays related to the opposite gender. A boy might pretend to be "Mom." A girl might dress up as a construction worker. This behavior is typical and expected and doesn't mean that a child is gay or identifying with the opposite gender.

## WHEN GENDER IDENTITY DOESN'T LINE UP WITH SEX

Most children's gender identity ends up matching their biological sex. For some children, their gender identity does not match. A child who is biologically male may identify as a girl, and vice versa. Our current understanding of gender is that it is a central part of your child's being. Gender is not something parents create. It's also not something you or your child

can change. Think of gender identity as like having blue eyes or being right-handed. It's not bad or good. It just is. The most important thing for any child to know is that they are fully accepted and loved for who they are. Ask your HealthySteps Specialist if you have questions about gender identity.

### **WHAT ABOUT "SEXUAL" PLAY AND MASTURBATION?**

Exploring bodies is a normal and healthy part of child development for all children. In the first few years of life, children show interest in their own, as well as others' private areas. Many babies discover their genitals and touch them from the time they are infants. Caregivers can either ignore this behavior (because it is quite normal) or simply state what is happening. Say, "You found your penis!" or, "That's your vulva."

Once children are older, it makes sense to set limits on this behavior. Limits teach your family's values about privacy and boundaries. For example, teaching toddlers that touching their genitals should not happen in public is a good idea. Many caregivers teach children that private parts should only be touched by the child themselves. Exceptions would be if a caregiver's help was needed for cleaning, or if a doctor needed to examine them. If children touch themselves in public, gently remind them that this activity is private. Punishment can cause children to feel badly about themselves or their bodies. It may also teach them they can't come to you with questions or problems about their bodies.

Red flags that might suggest a reason for concern would be if your child:

- Can't stop touching their genitals, even when reminded.
- Tries to involve other children or adults in their activity.
- Has any injury to their genitals or reports pain.
- Is acting out adult sexual acts.

If you see any of these behaviors, contact your HealthySteps Specialist or your child's primary care provider. Aside from these examples, it's very common for children to touch their privates. It's part of healthy child development. It can help to talk to another adult if you are embarrassed, surprised, or disturbed when your child explores their body. This support can help you keep your responses to this behavior calm and matter-of-fact.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO

