

# Guide to Age-Appropriate Sexual Health Information

Adapted information from Advocates for Youth “Growth and Development, What Parents Need to Know”  
by Barbara Huberman

Age	Sexual Development Most children will...	Age- Appropriate Information To help children develop a healthy sexuality, families and trusted adults should...
<b>0-3 years</b>	<p>Be curious and explore their own body and others' bodies</p> <p>Experience an erection or vaginal lubrication</p> <p>Touch their genitals for pleasure</p> <p>Talk openly about their bodies</p> <p>Be able to say and understand, when taught, the appropriate names for body parts (head, nose, stomach, penis, vulva, etc.)</p>	<p>Help children feel good about their entire body. Caregivers should name all body parts accurately and convey that the body and its functions are natural and healthy.</p> <p>Touch and comfort children often to help them understand love and how it can be shared. Meeting children's needs also helps them develop trust.</p> <p>Help children begin to understand the difference between public and private behaviors and that certain behaviors, such as picking one's nose or touching one's genitals, are private ones.</p> <p>Teach about anatomical differences between males and females while maintaining that boys and girls are equally special.</p> <p>Teach children that they can say no to unwanted touch, regardless of who is attempting to touch them, and that they have a right to be respected when they say no.</p> <p>Describe bodily processes, such as pregnancy and birth, in very simple terms.</p> <p>Avoid shame and guilt about body parts and functions.</p>
<b>4-5 years</b>	<p>Experience vaginal lubrication or erection</p> <p>Touch their genitals for pleasure</p> <p>Feel curiosity about everything, and ask about where babies come from and how they were born</p> <p>Feel curiosity about bodies and may play games like doctor</p> <p>Feel sure of their own gender and have the ability to recognize males and females</p> <p>Begin to recognize traditional male and female gender roles and to distinguish these roles by gender</p> <p>Become conscious of their own body, how it appears to others, and how it functions</p>	<p>Help children understand the concept of privacy and that talk about sexuality is private and occurs at home.</p> <p>Teach correct names of the major body parts (internal and external) and their basic functions.</p> <p>Explain how babies "get into" the mother's uterus.</p> <p>Encourage children to come to them or other trusted adults for information about sexuality.</p>

Age	Sexual Development Most children will...	Age- Appropriate Information To help children develop a healthy sexuality, families and trusted adults should...
<b>6-8 years</b>	<p>Prefer to socialize with their own gender almost exclusively and maintain a fairly rigid separation between males and females [They will tease someone who acts in a way that does not adhere to pre-defined gender roles.]</p> <p>Recognize the social stigmas and taboos surrounding sexuality, especially if parents are nervous about the subject, and will be less open about asking questions</p> <p>Understand more complex ideas with regard to sexuality and begin to understand intercourse apart from making a baby</p> <p>Look to peers, media, and other sources for information about sex</p> <p>Understand gender role stereotypes, if presented as such</p> <p>May engage in same-gender sexual exploration</p> <p>Have a stronger self-concept in terms of gender and body image</p>	<p>Continue to provide information about sexuality, even if a child does not ask for it. At these ages, children may ask fewer questions, but still have lots of curiosity and need information about sexuality.</p> <p>Explain that there are many different types of families and all types have equal value and deserve respect.</p> <p>Provide basic information about important sexuality issues, such as HIV/AIDS, abortion, marriage, and sexual abuse.</p> <p>Inform children about the changes that will take place when they begin puberty. Though most six- to eight-year-old children do not experience these changes, the age at which some begin to show signs of puberty, such as pubic hair, breast buds, and hair under the arms is gradually decreasing, so that children need this information sooner.</p> <p>Recognize that everyone does not have the same sexual orientation. Acknowledge to children that many people have romantic feelings for members of the other gender, and some have these feelings for members of the same gender.</p>
<b>9-12 years</b>	<p>Have an emerging sense of self as a young adult</p> <p>Feel conscious of their sexuality and how they choose to express it</p> <p>Understand jokes with sexual content</p> <p>Feel concerns about being normal, such as whether it is normal to masturbate, have wet dreams, etc.</p> <p>Feel anxious about puberty, when it will happen, how it will occur, how to be prepared, etc.</p> <p>Feel shy about asking questions of caregivers, especially regarding sexuality, and may act like they already know all the answers</p> <p>Value privacy highly</p> <p>Develop infatuations or "crushes" and may begin dating</p>	<p>Help young people understand puberty and the changes they are going through and that these changes, including menstruation and nocturnal emissions (ejaculation), are normal.</p> <p>Respect young people's privacy while encouraging open communication .</p> <p>Convey that growth and maturation rates differ from person to person.</p> <p>Help young people understand that, while they are maturing physically, they still have lots of emotional and cognitive growth ahead and that sexual intercourse is not healthy, appropriate, or wise at this time in their lives.</p> <p>Acknowledge that abstinence is normal and healthy, that sexual development is healthy and natural, and that, as they grow older, there will be many ways to express sexuality that do not include sexual intercourse.</p> <p>Discuss the important relationship between sexual and emotional feelings.</p> <p>Be open to <b>conversations about contraception</b> and condoms and respond honestly and accurately when young people ask about them.</p>

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<b>13-17 years</b>	<p>Understand that they are sexual and understand the options and consequences of sexual expression</p> <p>Choose to express their sexuality in ways that may or may not include sexual intercourse</p> <p>Recognize the components of healthy and unhealthy relationships</p> <p>Have a clear understanding of pregnancy and of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections and the possible consequences of sexual intercourse and have the ability to make reasoned choices about sex based on knowledge</p> <p>Recognize the role media play in propagating views about sex</p> <p>Have the capacity to learn about intimate, loving, long-term relationships</p> <p>Have an understanding of their own sexual orientation [This is different than sexual behavior]</p>	<p>Clearly articulate your family and religious values regarding sexual intercourse. Express that, although sex is pleasurable, young people should wait to initiate sex until they are in a mature, loving, and responsible relationship.</p> <p>Express that we all have a variety of options for experiencing intimacy and expressing love.</p> <p>Discuss together the factors, including age, mutual consent, protection, contraceptive use, love, intimacy, etc., that you and your teen believe should be a part of decisions about sexual intercourse.</p> <p>Reinforce teens' ability to make decisions while providing information on which they can base those decisions.</p> <p>Discuss contraceptive options and talk about the importance of condom use.</p> <p>Discuss teens' options, should unprotected intercourse occur—including emergency contraception and STI testing and treatment. Discuss teens' options, should pregnancy occur, including abortion, parenting, and adoption.</p> <p>Discuss exploitive behavior and why it is unhealthy and (in some cases) illegal.</p> <p>Help youth identify various physical and verbal responses to avoid/get away from sexual situations that make them feel uncomfortable.</p> <p>Acknowledge that teens have many future life options, that some may marry and/or parent while others may remain single and/or childless.</p> <p>Use inclusive language that recognizes that some youth may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.</p>
<b>18 + years</b>	<p>Enter into intimate sexual and emotional relationships</p> <p>Understand their own sexual orientation, although they may still experiment</p> <p>Understand sexuality as connected to commitment and planning for the future</p> <p>Shift their emphasis from self to others</p> <p>Experience more intense sexuality</p>	<p>Keep the lines of communication open and accept that the person is an adult, not a child.</p> <p>Offer choices, acknowledge responsibilities, and avoid dictates.</p> <p>Continue to offer physical and emotional closeness, but respect their need for privacy and independence.</p> <p>Appreciate them for their strengths and qualities.</p> <p>Facilitate their access to sexual and reproductive health care.</p> <p>Continue offering guidance and sharing values.</p>

Huberman, B., RN, M.Ed.(2015). "Growth and Development, What Parents Need to Know". Advocates for Youth. 17 Aug 2015.