



by Karen Stephens

Sexual Curiosity in Preschoolers: Respond to Support Healthy Sexual Development and Values

Kids are smart; they know a wondrous gift when they get one. With its amazing construction and sensory abilities, the human body is a gift indeed. So of course, it warrants children's curious attention.

Children eagerly explore what they can see, hear, touch, taste, or do. During the process, parents accompany children on a grand adventure to know oneself — body and soul.

The discoveries begin at birth as infants first notice body parts. Parents are first-guides as children investigate how body parts work and are controlled. (Need I specify toilet training here?)

Children gradually discover not everyone has the same body parts. In fact, there are two distinct genders!

Ultimately children uncover the jack-pot of all miracles: humans can make more humans! And every human starts off as a baby, just like they did.

Preschoolers can't quite grasp how all that takes place. But they understand it requires a man and woman; and that a baby grows inside of mom somehow. That's an impressive bit of knowledge to acquire before you're in kindergarten.

Typically by age four, children understand a girl is different from a boy, and that each gender has slightly different anatomy. They also understand that girls are like Mom; boys are like Dad.

But it's not until about age seven that children fully understand that gender can't change as one grows up. (Giving insight as to why some preschool boys wonder if their penis will fall off, and some girls wonder if they'll grow one.)

Parents are children's prime resource for information about sexuality. They also inspire children's values related to personal development, such as self-worth, self-respect, rights to safety and, ultimately, responsible sexuality.

So, how can parents respond to preschoolers' growing curiosity about gender and sexuality? The following are some suggestions:

Set the stage for healthy sexual development by capitalizing on "teachable moments." Those moments open a door to learning. Most moments occur casually during natural family routines, such as feeding, bathing, sleeping, calming tears, or dressing. The gentle care you take communicates that bodies are special and that we show affection through tender, nurturing touch.

Build awareness of body parts and function. Whenever relevant, from infancy through the preschool years, talk to children about their bodies and all it can do. Provide experiences for them to use their five senses.

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As you name body parts, casually use proper names, such as penis, breasts, anus, vulva, vagina, and uterus; just as you would talk about arm, hand, leg, and foot. Help children learn the correct name for body functions, too, such as urinating.

Think of key points to gradually share. For preschoolers, basic points could include, but aren't limited to: *Your body has different parts which do different things. Bodies are wonderful; you can be proud of yours. It's important to take care of your body and to keep it clean. Your body belongs to you. You never have to be nervous or afraid to ask me about how bodies work. I'm glad you ask me questions. People who like each other touch, such as holding hands. It feels good to show affection with hugs, kisses, or tickles. You will like some touches, but not others. You get to decide how your body is touched. Boys and girls have different body parts. We all have private body parts we cover with clothes in public. Sometimes it feels good to touch our private parts. Some things our bodies do are done privately, such as tooth brushing, bathing, using the toilet, or touching our bodies. Books can help you learn how bodies work. Always tell a parent or trusted grown-up if you're touched in a scary, hurtful, or uncomfortable way.* And so on . . .

Be honest, open, and respectful when sharing key points or responding to questions. Don't worry if you don't know all the "right" information to share. You can find that out. What's most important is how responsive and approachable you are.

Children will learn you're a safe source of guidance if you refrain from teasing or making them feel silly or ashamed for asking questions.

Your responses, both verbal and non-verbal, will communicate how comfortable you feel about sexual development. If questions make you nervous, honestly admit that. But still respond rather than changing the topic or stopping discussion.

You'll earn credibility and build trust if you don't abandon your child to their own imagination about the "mystery" of sex. Reliable information from a nervous parent is still better than uninformed answers from siblings, peers, or television sitcoms.

When preschoolers ask questions, be calm, simple, and brief. Whenever possible, talk when children bring up the subject. Take a breath and thank them for asking. Respond with something like, "Now that's an interesting question. This is what I know." After you answer a question, seek clarity with, "Did that answer your question?"

As your child grows, read about the next stage of sexual development. It will help you with age-appropriate information. Read books written for preschoolers to learn what questions children typically ask and answers that usually satisfy them. (Resources are listed at the end of this column.)

Anticipate answers to possible questions based on your child's age and abilities. Ponder a few options for reply. Children often ask the same question several times. Each time you answer, children understand in greater depth.

Try to view questions through your child's eyes so your answers don't create needless worries or misconceptions. For instance, if a child asks if a baby is growing in that woman's tummy, you can say, "No, it's growing in her uterus, a special place for babies to grow before they are born."

Saying that babies grow in a "tummy" sometimes confuses children because they know how stomachs get big and full; and then they'll worry they'll grow a baby in their own tummy if they eat too much. It's better to be accurate and direct by simply introducing the body part named "uterus."

For preschoolers, avoid "over answering" a question. Too much information can overwhelm. Be clear on what a child is really asking before you answer a question.

For instance, a preschooler may ask what "screw" means. A parent could assume that calls for discussion about intercourse.

But rather than assume, first casually ask for clarification with, “Where did you hear it used?”. Most likely, the child heard it used in a new way by an older child or television character. If so, the preschooler just needed to know that “screw” is sometimes used like an impolite cuss word. Explaining the mechanics of intercourse would be premature.

To encourage discussion, read children’s books together. Select books written specifically for your child’s age. Don’t hesitate to re-read books. Children’s understanding — and questions — grows over time. Re-visiting questions through book reading and discussion helps children gradually make sense of information.

Listen attentively to children to catch misconceptions early. You never know exactly what children are thinking. Their logic is astounding, even when a bit off the mark. Listen closely to confirm or correct what children say about sex and gender.

A mother in our child care center told me her four-year-old Kiki asked during bath time: “Mom, why don’t teachers have pee-pees?”

Well, that was a new one! Of course mom reassured Kiki that teachers do have them; that all people have what their family called “pee-pees.”

Kiki replied emphatically that no, her teachers did not. Wise mom asked her why she thought that. Kiki replied that she never saw her teachers using the bathroom, saying: “If they had pee-pees they’d use the potty sometime.”

You have to admit, that was a reasonable deduction! After hearing the story, naturally I took Kiki to the adult bathroom the teachers used. I showed her how it had bigger toilets, unlike the smaller classroom ones. I told her they were more comfortable potties for grown-up people like teachers.

After her worry, I expected Kiki to show relief or excitement over this new revelation. But she merely looked, nodded her head, said “Okay” and turned to go back to her classroom.

Suffice it to say, our teachers now announce when they leave for the bathroom. Hopefully all children now know teachers are human, too.

Listed below are resources for understanding and supporting children’s expanding sexual development. Both books for children and parents are included. Your local librarian or bookseller may have others to suggest.

Books for Preschoolers to Grade 3

Amazing You! Getting Smart about Your Private Parts by Gail Saltz (New York: Dutton, 2005)

What’s the Big Deal? Talking About Sex with Girls and Boys by Laurie Krasny Brown (New York: Little Brown, 1997)

How You Were Born? by Joanna Cole (New York: HarperTrophy, 1993)

Books for Parents

Teaching Human Sexuality: A guide for parents and other caregivers by Judy Cyprian (Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, 1998)

Healthy Sexual Development: A guide for early childhood educators and families by Kent Chrisman and Donna Couchenour (Washington DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children 2002)

On the Internet for Parents and Teachers

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. — www.siecus.org/parent/index.html

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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