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## Healthy Sexual Behaviors in Children

The birds and the bees. It can be a tough conversation for any parent to have with their children. Rather than avoiding it, prepare early by understanding the childhood stages of healthy sexual growth. Understanding their development stages can better prepare you for “the conversation” and any questions they may ask you about gender, sexuality and relationships along the way.

Military OneSource is here to arm you with the facts on healthy sexual behavior in children. The more you know, the more you can be the best guardians of your military children’s safety and well-being. Providing children with accurate, age-appropriate information is vital to raising safe and healthy kids, and another way to power up your parenting. To that end, we’ve assembled a list of healthy sexual behaviors in children – and resources if your child demonstrates concerning sexual behavior.

### Healthy sexual behaviors in children - takeaways for military parents

All children develop sexually beginning at a very early age. Sometimes it can be hard to know which child behaviors are normal and which are concerning. The [National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth](#) has looked at the research, and we’ve distilled the common child behaviors by age for you.

0 to 2 years old - Infant to Toddler add

Common and expected healthy child behaviors in this age range:

- Curiosity about their body, including genitals
- Touching their genitals in public and in private
- Removing clothes and wanting to be naked

To encourage healthy development, parents can:

- Teach children the correct names for body parts (“penis,” “vagina,” etc.) and avoid using other terms which may confuse them
- Explain the basic anatomical differences between a male and a female
- Answer their questions in age-appropriate ways using simple, clear language
- Begin to build your child’s feeling vocabulary by describing observed feelings. For example, say “You seem angry that your sister doesn’t want to play.”

2 to 5 years old - Toddler to Kindergarten add

Common and expected healthy child behaviors in this age range:

- Occasional masturbation as a soothing behavior, either publicly or privately
- Consensual and playful exploration of bodies with children of the same age, evolving to “playing house” or “playing doctor”
- Asks questions about sexuality or reproduction, like “Where do babies come from?” or “What makes girls different from boys?”
- May be curious about adult bodies and express that curiosity in socially unacceptable ways, such as wanting to use the bathroom or shower with parents or touching a woman’s breasts
- Continued lack of caring about nudity and will occasionally remove clothes
- Begins to use slang terms for body parts and functions

To encourage healthy development, parents can:

- Start answering children’s questions by asking them first what they think happens, then continuing the conversation from there with basic, clear information. For example, say “Babies grow in a mommy’s uterus.”
- Encourage a basic understanding of privacy and appropriate behavior in certain situations. For example, say “Daddy is using the bathroom right now, so we don’t go in there.”
- Introduce the idea of healthy boundaries by explaining the difference between a wanted and unwanted touch. Teach children about personal boundaries so they understand their body belongs to them and they may refuse touches – like a stranger’s or relative’s hug – they don’t want without getting in trouble or hurting someone’s feelings.
- Teach children about respecting others’ personal boundaries. Explain that it’s important to ask before touching someone else, because that person might not want to be touched.
- Support and encourage your child to use words to express and describe their feelings, without punishment for feeling negative

5 to 8 years old - Elementary School add

Common and expected healthy child behaviors in this age range:

- More use of slang terms to include “potty humor”

- Begins to understand cultural gender roles, and may act in a more “gendered” way as they learn expected behaviors and norms, such as girls asking to wear dresses
- Activities that explore sexuality and bodies may occur with same- and opposite-sex friends, such as showing or touching someone else’s private areas by mutual consent, kissing, etc.
- Masturbation may continue for pleasure, more often in private than in public

To encourage healthy child behavior, your military family can:

- Promote a solid understanding of gender and how children experience gender identity. Children who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming may begin to experience this now but may not have the words for their experience, and express confusion. These children will need strong and loving support from their parents.
- Explain more of the basics of human reproduction, including the purpose of vaginal intercourse
- Talk about the changes they can expect when puberty happens like rapid growth, body hair growth and emotional shifts, keeping in mind that puberty can occur before the traditionally referenced age of 12 or 13
- Discuss the different sexual orientations like heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual that exist
- Teach that masturbation is something that occurs in private situations only
- Continue promoting personal rights and responsibilities related to sexuality, like treating boys and girls equally
- Continue teaching about respecting personal boundaries, as well as the ability to say “no” to any unwanted activity without feeling guilt or shame or accepting “no” from another with empathy and kindness.

9 to 12 years old - Middle School add

Common and expected healthy child behaviors in this age range:

- Expresses an increased need for privacy and personal independence as puberty begins
- New interest in romantic relationships - may want a boyfriend or girlfriend
- More curiosity about adult bodies and sexuality, including trying to see others naked and finding sexual content to watch or read
- Masturbation may continue in private

To encourage healthy development, parents can:

- Offer children continuing information about puberty - including the physical, emotional and social changes that are normal and healthy for people their age
- Give children age-appropriate information about sexual activities and behaviors, including sexually transmitted diseases

- Encourage children’s critical thinking skills to separate reality from fiction in media portrayals of sexuality
- Remind children that relationships – including friendships – require work to maintain and grow, and teach them the qualities of a healthy relationship, such as respect and trust
- Repeat the importance that they have a right to refuse any unwanted behavior from others and others have a right to refuse any unwanted behavior.

More parent-friendly resources to help you learn more about your child’s behavior – and how you can help them grow into happy, healthy adults – can be found at the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) and the [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#). Learn more about [Sexual Development and Behavior in Children](#) and [Understanding and Coping with Sexual Behavior Problems in Children](#).

## **Addressing unhealthy sexual behaviors in children**

If a child’s sexual behavior occurs weekly or daily, involves playmates of vastly different ages or developmental stages, hurts anyone or otherwise forces unwanted sexual activities onto others, that child may be demonstrating concerning or problematic sexual behaviors which warrant an assessment by a professional to ensure the safety and well-being of all children.

As part of the military family, [the Department of Defense’s Family Advocacy Program](#) can offer you guidance and access to effective professional help in your area as part of its mission to prevent abuse within the military community. If you need assistance, [contact your local installation’s Family Advocacy Program](#) or contact Military OneSource directly [by phone](#) or [online chat](#).

Most children who show problematic sexual behaviors respond well to informed parent support, increased guidance and supervision and evidence-based treatment programs, with no future incidents of sexually inappropriate behavior. The Department of Defense is committed to helping the entire military community grow strong together.