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## Talking to pre-schoolers about sex

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### Summary

- Children who have a clear understanding of sexual issues are more likely to behave responsibly, for example, by waiting until they are older before they start having sex, and choosing to use contraceptives.
  - If you cringe or change the subject whenever your child mentions a sexual issue, you'll give them the idea that it's wrong to discuss such things with you.
  - Read age-appropriate books on sex together with your child.
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Ideally, talking to your child about sex is an ongoing process that begins when they are very young. It's best not to think of sex education as a single lecture given when a child reaches puberty. By the age of four, most children are curious about certain sexual issues and they need clear, honest and brief answers to their questions.

Don't think that telling a child about sex makes them sexually precocious. On the contrary, research indicates that children who have a clear understanding of sexual issues are more likely to behave responsibly, for example, waiting until they are older before they start having sex, and choosing to use contraceptives. If you talk to your preschooler about sex, it paves the way for open communication about sexual issues as they get older.

### Normal sexual development of a preschooler

Don't be horrified or alarmed if your preschooler starts taking an interest in sexual issues - this is completely normal. Typical behaviours can include:

- Masturbation
- Interest in the physical characteristics of the opposite sex
- Undressing with another preschooler and 'playing doctor' together
- Wondering where babies come from.

### Preparing yourself

Parents may feel embarrassed, uncomfortable or hesitant when talking to their children about sex. Suggestions include:

- Discuss your child's sex education with your partner, and any other adults involved in the child's parenting, and decide on a consistent approach.
- If you can't think of what to say, or are unsure how much information to tell your child, try giving a little bit of information and see if they have more questions. There are lots of good books and websites that help you learn a little more about the correct names for body parts, or find good examples of how to explain different subjects.
- Decide which words you're going to use. If you prefer to use slang words like 'privates' or 'willy', remember that your child also needs to know the correct words for body parts such as the penis and vagina.
- Your child may sometimes put you on the spot when you don't have a ready reply. A phrase such as, 'What a good question. Let's talk about that later,' can give you some time to think about what you're going to say. However, make sure you keep your word and talk about the issue.

### Masturbation

Masturbation in young children is a normal part of human sexual development. Suggestions include:

- Reassure yourself that masturbation is not a sign of sexual deviancy.
  - Focus on the setting, rather than the activity. For example, if your child masturbates in public, tell them that what they're doing is fine, but that it's something to do in private, just like going to the toilet.
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## **'Playing doctor'**

Curiosity about gender differences can lead to your child undressing with another preschooler. Suggestions include:

- Don't be angry or react in a horrified way if you find your child 'playing doctor'. Calm yourself and distract the children with another activity.
- Later, use the experience as an opportunity to discuss gender with your child. Talk about how the bodies of girls and boys are different.
- With regards to 'playing doctor', tell them that looking at someone else's body is fine but touching should be avoided because genitals are private.
- This might be a good opportunity to talk about unwanted sexual touching. Tell your child that no one is allowed to touch their genitals, and that they should let you know straight away if somebody does.
- Further, explain that genitals are not for public display and that clothes need to stay on.

## **Where babies come from**

Young children are constantly busy figuring out how the world works, which includes how babies are made. Typical questions can include 'Where do babies come from?' and 'Can men have babies too?'. Suggestions include:

- Treat their questions about reproduction like you would any other request for information about how things work. Be calm, honest and factual.
- Avoid fanciful explanations like 'The stork brings the baby,' or 'Babies are found in cabbage patches'.
- Keep your answers simple. There's no need to go into a detailed explanation of human reproduction. For example, if your child asks for the first time where babies come from, say something like 'a baby grows in its mummy's tummy'.
- Explain the details slowly and in small chunks, as time goes on. For example, you may follow up by saying: 'When the baby is big enough, it comes out through a passage in the mummy's body called the vagina'.
- Your own pregnancy, the pregnancy of a friend or even pets giving birth are opportunities that can help clarify the process for your child.

## **Sexual intercourse**

Your child may ask, 'How does the baby get in there in the first place?'. This is the topic that most parents would prefer to leave out of their young child's sex education, but don't be evasive. It is far better to respond truthfully to their questions. Suggestions include:

- Once again, keep your explanations simple but factual. Be guided by your child's questions - if they want more information or greater detail, give it to them.
- Use picture books to help explain human anatomy.
- It may help if you read age-appropriate books on sex together with your child. If your child has questions, answer them honestly and simply.
- Question your child about sex, because their answers will let you know whether they understand or not.

## **What to do if your child expresses no interest**

While many young children ask questions about sexual issues, some don't. Suggestions include:

- Don't leave it. If your child hasn't any interest or curiosity, broach the topic yourself.
- Look for everyday opportunities to get the conversation started - for example, the pregnancy of a friend or relative.
- Have age-appropriate sex education books in the house and read them together like you would any other story. Answer their questions as they arise.

## **Where to get help**

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Maternal and child health nurse**
- **Parent Line** Tel: **1300 30 1300**

- **Family Planning Victoria** Freecall: **1800 013 952** or Tel: **03 9257 0100**

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