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- Talking to pre-schoolers about sex

## Talking to pre-schoolers about sex

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- [Sexual health - Sex education](#)

## 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.

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.

## '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 doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Bookshops or libraries
- Parent Line Tel: 132 289
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100

## Things to remember

- 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.

### References

- *Sex and relationships education*, fpa (formerly The Family Planning Association), UK. [More information here.](#)
- Schmitt, Dr BD 2003, *Talking With Your Child About Sex*, University of Michigan Health System, McKesson Health Solutions LLC, USA. [More information here.](#)

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### Sexual health

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### Sexual health basics

- [Contraception - condoms for men](#)  
[Condoms are the most effective way to reduce your risk of contracting a sexually transmissible infection \(STI\) during sex...](#)
- [Contraception - condoms for women](#)  
[The female condom is effective in preventing an unplanned pregnancy and protecting against sexually transmissible infections \(STIs\)...](#)
- [Contraception - choices](#)

[The method of contraception you choose will depend on your general health, lifestyle and relationships...](#)

- [Contraception - emergency contraception](#)

[It is best to take emergency contraception as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, but it still works well within 96 hours \(four days\)...](#)

- [Masturbation](#)

[Masturbation is a normal and healthy way for people to explore their own bodies...](#)

- [Oral sex](#)

[Oral sex is using your mouth, lips or tongue to stimulate your partner's genitals or anus. Both men and women can give and receive oral sex...](#)

- [Safe sex](#)

[Safe sex is sexual contact that doesn't involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners...](#)

- [Sex – are you ready](#)

[It is normal to have mixed feelings about having sex with someone else...](#)

- [Sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#)

[It is not difficult to avoid catching sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)...](#)

- [Women's sexual and reproductive health \(video\)](#)

[Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions \(such as PCOS and endometriosis\)...](#)

### **Sexual relationships**

- [Partying safely and sex](#)

[Partying is fun but being out of it on alcohol or drugs can put you at risk of unwanted or unsafe sex...](#)

- [Safe sex](#)

[Safe sex is sexual contact that doesn't involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners...](#)

- [Sex – are you ready](#)

[It is normal to have mixed feelings about having sex with someone else...](#)

- [Time to immunise - free vaccines for men who have sex with men](#)

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[Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions \(such as PCOS and endometriosis\)...](#)

### **Sexuality and sexual identity**

- [Bisexuality](#)

[Bisexuality is when a person finds men and women physically, sexually or emotionally attractive...](#)

- [Family violence and the LGBTIQ communities](#)

[Within Australia, intimate partner violence is the most common form of family violence. Evidence presented to the Royal Commission into Family Violence suggests intimate partner violence is as...](#)

- [Gay male sexuality](#)

[There is no real explanation as to why some men are gay and others are not; it is just part of the wide variety of human sexuality...](#)

- [Lesbian sexuality](#)

[Many women report they have lesbian experiences or feelings, but do not think of themselves as lesbians...](#)

- [Men and sexuality](#)

[Sexuality is not about whom we have sex with, or how often we have it. Sexuality is about our sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards other people. We can find other people...](#)

- [Mental health and wellbeing support for LGBTI people](#)

[If you or someone you know requires support from an LGBTI or mental health organisation there are services available...](#)

- [Sexuality explained](#)

[Sexuality is not about whom we have sex with, or how often we have it. Sexuality is about our sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards other people. We can find other people...](#)

- [Switchboard \(Victoria\)](#)

[The Gay and Lesbian Switchboard \(Victoria\) is a telephone helpline that gives advice, information, counselling and referrals to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex \(GLBTI\) people in...](#)

- [Trans and gender diverse people](#)

[Your gender is what feels natural to you, even if it is different from your biological sex. Some people may not feel comfortable with their biological sex but choose to live with the gender with which...](#)

- [Women and sexuality](#)

[Most girls start puberty around 10 years old, but it can be earlier or later than that. Your body will go through big changes as you change from a girl into a young woman. For some girls \(and women...](#)

## Sex education

- [Sex education - tips for parents](#)

[Mothers are more likely to talk about intimate, emotional and psychological aspects of sex than fathers...](#)

- [Talking to children with intellectual disabilities about sex](#)

[All people, including those with intellectual disabilities, have the right to explore and express their sexuality in appropriate ways...](#)

- [Talking to pre-schoolers about sex](#)

[By four, most children are curious about certain sexual issues, and they need honest answers to their questions...](#)

- [Talking to primary school children about sex](#)

[Some parents find it hard to talk with their primary age children about sex, but help is available...](#)

- [Talking to young people about sex](#)

[Talking about sex with your child is easier if you start when your child is young...](#)

- [Talking to young people with intellectual disabilities about sex](#)

[Young people with intellectual disabilities have the same range of sexual feelings and desires as young people without disabilities...](#)

- [Women's sexual and reproductive health \(video\)](#)

[Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions \(such as PCOS and endometriosis\)...](#)

## Sexual assault and abuse

- [Date rape](#)

[Date rape can be especially common among young people who have had little sexual experience and aren't sure that what they have experienced crosses the line into rape. Many victims of date rape can...](#)

- [People with a disability who experience violence, abuse or neglect](#)

[People with a disability who experience violence, abuse or neglect can seek help from a range of services specifically designed to help them...](#)

- [Recognising when a child is at risk](#)

[Too many children are physically, sexually and emotionally abused and when this happens, it is up to adults to speak up...](#)

- [Sexual abuse](#)

[If you suspect sexual abuse or have been told about it by a child, you must report it...](#)

- [Sexual abuse - helping your child](#)

[As a parent, you have an important role in helping your child recover from sexual abuse...](#)

- [Sexual assault](#)

[Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual behaviour or activity that makes the victim feel uncomfortable, frightened or threatened...](#)

## Contraception and abortion

- [Abortion](#)

[All women should have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decisions...](#)

- [Abortion procedures - medication](#)

[Mifepristone, also called RU486 or the 'abortion pill', is used to terminate \(end\) a pregnancy up to nine weeks...](#)

- [Abortion procedures - surgical](#)

[Abortion is one of the most common and safest types of surgery in Australia...](#)

- [Contraception after an abortion](#)

[Whether you have a surgical or medical abortion you can become fertile again very soon after the abortion, so it's important to start using contraception immediately if you wish to prevent any...](#)

- [Contraception after giving birth](#)

[After having a baby, you need to choose an effective method of contraception if you don't want to have another baby straight away...](#)

- [Contraception - choices](#)

[The method of contraception you choose will depend on your general health, lifestyle and relationships...](#)

- [Contraception - condoms for men](#)

[Condoms are the most effective way to reduce your risk of contracting a sexually transmissible infection \(STI\) during sex...](#)

- [Contraception - condoms for women](#)

[The female condom is effective in preventing an unplanned pregnancy and protecting against sexually transmissible infections \(STIs\)...](#)

- [Contraception - diaphragms](#)

[The diaphragm acts as a barrier method of contraception...](#)

- [Contraception - emergency contraception](#)

[It is best to take emergency contraception as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, but it still works well within 96 hours \(four days\)...](#)

- [Contraception - implants and injections](#)

[Hormonal contraception for women is available as implants or injections that slowly release hormones into the body over time...](#)

- [Contraception - injections for men](#)

[Contraceptive injections for men are not yet available in Australia, but clinical studies suggest that they may provide a safe, effective and reversible method of male contraception in the future...](#)

- [Contraception - intrauterine devices \(IUD\)](#)

[An intrauterine device \(IUD\) is a small contraceptive device that is put into the uterus \(womb\) to prevent pregnancy...](#)

- [Contraception - Louna's lowdown on emergency contraception \(video\)](#)

[This video was made by the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, Australia, with Louna Maroun to inform teenagers about this safe, effective form of contraception to prevent an unplanned pregnancy...](#)

- [Contraception - the mini pill](#)

[The two types of oral contraception available in Australia are the combined pill, known as "the Pill", and the mini pill...](#)

- [Contraception - tubal ligation](#)

[Sterilisation is a permanent method of contraception that a woman can choose if she is sure that she does not want children in the future...](#)

- [Contraception - vaginal ring](#)

[The vaginal ring works in a similar way to the oral contraceptive pill to prevent pregnancy...](#)

- [Contraception - vasectomy](#)

[Having a vasectomy does not affect a man's ability to produce male sex hormones, enjoy sex or reach orgasm...](#)

- [Pregnancy - unplanned](#)

[When a woman does not want to become a parent, her pregnancy options may include abortion or adoption...](#)

## Sexual issues throughout life

- [Disability and sexuality](#)

[Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support...](#)

- [Intellectual disability and sexuality](#)

[People with intellectual disability can express their sexuality in satisfying ways...](#)

- [Menopause and sexual issues](#)

[Menopause, the final menstrual period, is a natural event that marks the end of a woman's reproductive years...](#)

- [Puberty](#)

[Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people...](#)

- [Sex and chronic illness](#)

[Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support...](#)

## Health conditions and sexual issues

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[A brain injury can change the way a person experiences and expresses their sexuality...](#)

- [Diabetes and erectile dysfunction](#)

[Men with diabetes are more prone to problems with erectile dysfunction or impotence...](#)

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[Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support...](#)

- [HIV and men - safer sex](#)

[HIV transmission can occur from men to women and from women to men as well as between men who have sex with men...](#)

- [HIV and women – having children](#)

[Women living with human immunodeficiency virus \(HIV\), or women whose partner is HIV-positive, may wish to have children but feel concerned about the risk of transmission of the virus to themselves \(if...](#)

- [HIV and women – safer sex](#)

[Practising safe sex is important, whether your partner is HIV-positive or not...](#)

- [Intellectual disability and sexuality](#)

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- [Parkinson's disease and sexual issues](#)

[Communication is the best remedy for all types of relationship problems, including sexual problems caused by Parkinson's disease...](#)

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