

On the whole children do not develop a healthy attitude towards sex by watching adults engage in sexual activities, be it their parents, other adults or on videotape. They find it confusing and frightening, and may become emotionally distressed.

Overtly sexualised play, such as simulated sexual intercourse, erotic language or use of sex 'toys' is learned, rather than natural behaviour in young children. Such behaviour may indicate exposure of the child to sexual situations. It is recommended that parents contact a child health nurse or their general practitioner if they feel that this behaviour does not have a satisfactory explanation.

### DRESSING UP AND TOYS

Parents are sometimes very concerned when a small boy (usually about three to six years old) shows a marked preference for girl-type activities, toys, dolls and clothes. This is usually a passing phase – a small boy wishing temporarily to imitate and identify with his mother, and practising the caring and tender side of fathering. It does not – as many adults fear – indicate a tendency towards homosexuality.

In the same way, but usually when they are a little older, girls may adopt tomboyish behaviour. In most cases these children are quite happy with the sex nature made them. They just enjoy some of the activities which adults see as belonging traditionally to the other sex.

### DEVELOPING POSITIVE ATTITUDES

All babies enjoy their bodies and have good feelings about them.

Adult values and attitudes are communicated to children through what parents and other adults do or say, how they do or say it ... and what they don't do or say.

It is vital, therefore, to keep an open, positive, comfortable communication line between yourself and your child – beginning as early as possible so that it will continue into the teen years.

Comfortable reactions and communication encourage children to develop positive attitudes about the broad role that sexuality plays in our lives.

#### Remember...

- Sexuality is a natural part of being a man or woman.
- 'Sex play' is quite normal.
- Comfortable communication helps develop positive attitudes to sexuality.

*Ask your GP*



Department of Health  
Government of Western Australia

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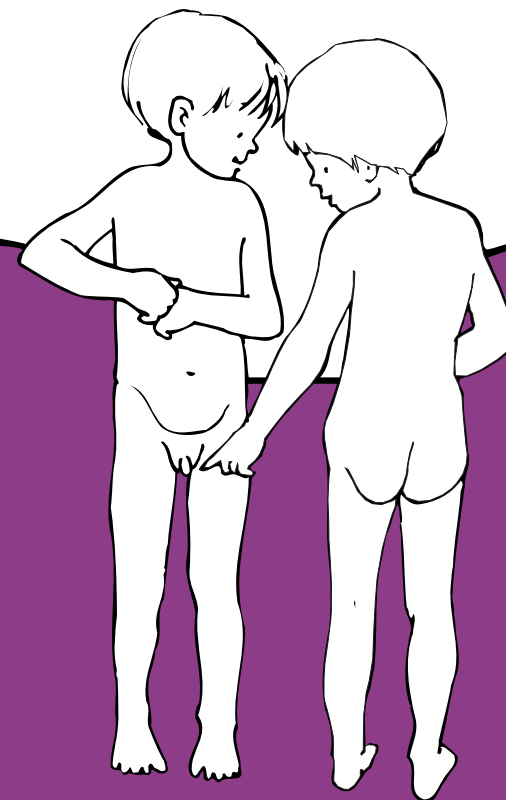
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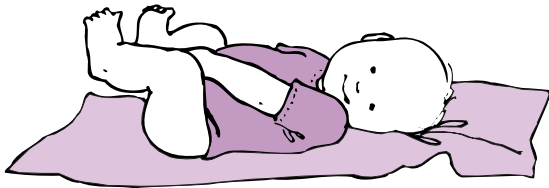
# Childhood Sexuality



Sexuality is a natural, normal part of being a whole person – being a man or a woman. It is about love and intimate relationships; about feelings, values and attitudes.

Our sexuality is about what we are rather than what we do, and relates to everything we say, feel or think as a male or as a female.

We learn about love, affection and physical contact from the day we are born: through how our parents hold us, touch us, speak to us; through how they show affection to each other; from living in a family. We learn whether we are loved, valued and belong. We learn to appreciate ourselves and our bodies. And what we learn in these early years affects our sexual attitudes and behaviours for life.



### **NORMAL BEHAVIOUR**

From the time they are only a few weeks old, all babies, if allowed, will touch and explore their bodies. They enjoy the pleasure of physical contact – including nice feelings they get when they stroke their genitals, or when they stimulate them by rubbing their legs together or their bodies against some object such as a pillow.

Parents often don't expect this sort of behaviour, and feel anxious or uncomfortable about it. However, babies are not born feeling ashamed, embarrassed or guilty about their bodies. They learn these attitudes from the messages – verbal and non-verbal – they receive from their parents and other adults during their early years.

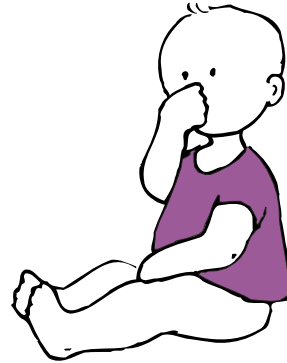
It is important not to confuse our opinions and values on sexuality with what is normal behaviour for children.

### **MASTURBATION**

Masturbation – or playing with oneself – is a normal, healthy part of development. It can make a positive contribution to a child's future sexual

health. Feeling guilty about masturbation is really the only undesirable aspect of it.

When a young child masturbates, it is best to leave well alone. As the child grows older, parents can help develop the understanding that, while the behaviour itself is normal, it is best done in private.



Some children masturbate more than others, and some not at all. They may do it because they need comfort, because they are bored or tired, or just because it feels good. However, when children masturbate to the exclusion of other activities, it may indicate that they are feeling unhappy, anxious or stressed, and they need professional help.

### **SEXUAL CURIOSITY**

When children reach the stage of asking and learning names for things, they become curious about gender differences and want to give names to body parts as well.

Children need to know the differences between genitals and body shapes in men, women and children. They need to know that, although they are different, boys and girls are equally wonderful and important.

Whether parents allow themselves to be seen naked or not is a matter of personal preference. What is important is that parents are comfortable in their own behaviour, and realise that other people may have different attitudes.

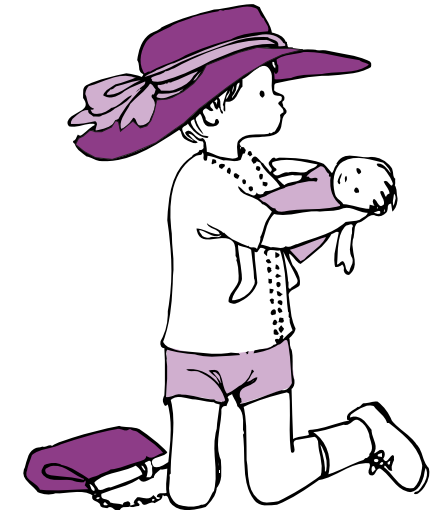
### **SEX PLAY**

Almost all children engage in 'sex' play at some stage – sometimes with children of the same sex, sometimes of the opposite sex – "You show me yours, and I'll show you mine!" They are exploring their own bodies and those of other children. In this way, they learn about differences and similarities, and get practical reassurance.

This play is not bad, dangerous or perverted, and for the most part adults can ignore it. It is the result of natural curiosity, not of an unhealthy interest in sex. If you feel more comfortable suggesting another activity, try to do so in a way which does not cause the children to feel ashamed or guilty.

### **IMITATION AND FANTASY**

Children are great imitators. Through make-believe play, they identify with adults and act out thoughts and feelings which may involve genital play.



Some adults are disturbed to see groups of two or three children simulating adult sexual intercourse. Children are trying to understand adult behaviour which they have seen. They may interpret this behaviour as anger and attack, rather than passion and excitement.