# Sexual Health and Safety

HealthySteps®
PEDIATRIC CARE • SUPPORTING • PARENTING
A Program of ZERO TO THREE

Many caregivers want to know how to discuss children's bodies and how to respond to their early interest in "sexual" play.

## TALKING ABOUT BODIES

The positive messages you send will lead them to feel proud of their bodies and have healthy self-esteem. Use the correct names for all body parts, including genitals. Children notice if only certain parts of their bodies get special names. When privates are not named at all it can cause confusion or shame. Proper terms for body parts may feel embarrassing at first. But if you use them right from the start, it will get more comfortable. They will learn that it's okay to talk about their bodies. Correct names can also help your child feel in charge of their body. They will then know the words to tell you if there is any unwanted touch or abuse.

## WHAT ABOUT "SEXUAL" PLAY AND MASTURBATION?

Exploring bodies is a normal and healthy part of development for all children. In the first few years of life, children show interest in their own, as well as others' private areas. Many babies discover their genitals and touch them from the time they are infants. Caregivers can either ignore this behavior (because it is quite normal) or simply state what is happening. Say, "You found your penis!" or, "That's your vulva."

Once children are older, it makes sense to set limits on this behavior. Limits teach your family's values about privacy and boundaries. For example,

© 2023 ZERO TO THREE. Adaptations, reproductions, revisions, excerpts, derivatives including but not limited to translations, and other exploitation of the materials are expressly forbidden without the prior written authorization of ZERO TO THREE.

you might teach your toddler that touching their genitals should not happen in public. Many caregivers teach children that their private parts should only be touched by themself. Exceptions would be if a caregiver's help is needed for cleaning, or if a doctor needs to examine them. If children touch themselves in public, gently remind them that this activity is private. Punishment can cause children to feel bad about themselves or their bodies. It may also teach them they can't come to you with questions or problems about their body.

## BEHAVIORS THAT MIGHT BE CONCERNING ARE IF YOUR CHILD:

- Can't stop touching their genitals, even when reminded.
- Tries to involve other children or adults in their activity.
- Has any injury to their genitals or reports pain.
- Is acting out adult sexual acts.

If you see any of these behaviors, contact your HealthySteps Specialist or your child's primary care provider. It can help to talk to another adult if you are embarrassed, surprised, or disturbed when your child explores their body. This support can help you keep your responses to this behavior calm and matter of fact.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO

© 2023 ZERO TO THREE. Adaptations, reproductions, revisions, excerpts, derivatives including but not limited to translations, and other exploitation of the materials are expressly forbidden without the prior written authorization of ZERO TO THREE.