



Young children's sexual development

Information on young children's sexual
development for parents with children in day care

BØRN OG UNGE
Århus Kommune



Dear parents

In this information leaflet you can read more about children's natural sexual development and how we as adults can relate to it.

Children have a natural curiosity towards each other, and this curiosity can be expressed through their play. We hope that this information leaflet will enable you as a parent, and the staff in your child's day care institution, to have a constructive and open dialogue on the subject.

Children are curious

Young children are spontaneous and curious about the body and about gender, just as they are curious about everything else that they encounter in life. It is a part of children's natural development: they explore their own and others' bodies, they take off their clothes and are keen to know the difference between girls and boys. It is not unusual for children to touch their body and private parts because it feels nice. It is perfectly normal.

Children begin to explore their own bodies as soon as they can use their hands. At one and a half to two years of age, they can touch themselves and are curious about other children's bodies.

And they can be curious when they see parents or siblings without clothes. Around the age of 3, children begin to pay close attention to their body. They start playing "doctor" by examining their own and other children's private body parts.

Children's sexuality is spontaneous, sensual and playful. They use their whole body. Children sense the mystery of the body, but they have no way of understanding what sexuality is.

The sexuality of children cannot be compared to the sexuality of adults.



How do children explore their sexuality?

Children play games involving the body

It is normal for children to think it is fun to say naughty words such as bum. They also think it's exciting to talk about how babies are made.

It is also normal for children to play "doctor" or "kissing-tag", where they explore each other's bodies. For children, the body's private parts are not taboo in the way that they can be for adults. However, children must learn to say "no" and learn to notice if the games overstep any boundaries, are no longer equal, voluntary and spontaneous.

The games must take place in a positive atmosphere characterised by curiosity and exploration - and they must ALWAYS be played with children of the same age.

Children can also develop their body awareness by touching themselves. Many children have periods when they touch their private parts in the presence of other children. It is natural and will more often than not decline over time. However, children must learn that it is preferable that some things are conducted in private, especially when school age approaches.



As a parent, how do you relate to your child's developing body awareness?

You may be in doubt

As a parent, you may be surprised and even a little frightened if your child starts to turn their attention to the body when they play games.

It is not uncommon for you as a parent to be in doubt about what normal behaviour and play is. What exactly are the boundaries when young children begin to take an interest in the body and gender? Parents can especially be in doubt in light of the fact that public debate often focuses on abuse and not on children's completely natural, age-appropriate, sensual and bodily curiosity.

Children's sexuality consists of spontaneous emotions and sensations. Children are not at all aware that feelings they have regarding their body are sexual. In this way, children's sexuality differs significantly from the sexuality of adults.

Children are direct and open about questions relating to the body. Try to maintain this openness: answer their questions as best you can. Talk about topics relating to the body in the same way that you talk about anything else. Avoid giving your child too much sexual information if they ask about the body's private parts. Give your child a natural explanation to any questions they pose and answer questions with words that they can understand. In this respect, good picture books can be helpful when talking about the body to children.

The most important thing is that you support your child to develop 'Yes' feelings and 'No' feelings. You need to support your child by telling them that they can say "no" if someone tries to get them to do something they don't like.





How does the day care institution relate to children's play involving the body?

Children should have the freedom to be curious when they play. In some games, they are curious about each other's bodies. In the day care institution, the teachers must relate to these games in the same way that they relate to any other form of play.

But it is, of course, important that teachers observe and guide the children so that the games remain equal, voluntary and spontaneous, and that the games are played with children their own age.

How do parents and day care institutions work together?

As a parent, you may find that your child asks questions about the body and feelings related to the body or tells you about episodes that they have experienced at the day care institution. In this situation, it is important that you as a parent speak to the manager or a teacher at the institution if you have any doubts about how to act.

In the public debate, there is often focus on child abuse. In this regard, many day care institutions have introduced rules and guidelines for appropriate physical contact between children and between children and adults. These guidelines have been written to protect children and adults, especially male teachers. For example, there may be rules about playing "doctor", dress, as well as rules on minimal body contact with children.

Remember that a great deal of the care of a child involves contact. Children need body contact and physical presence - also while they are attending day care institutions. This applies when they need to be comforted, read to, played with, have their nappy changed and when they need help going to the toilet.

Parents and day care institutions can discuss where the boundaries lie for the children's game of "doctor", whether the children can play without clothes in the "pillow room", or whether they can take their t-shirts off in the playground on a hot summer day.

Together, you can discuss how you create the best environment for children's curiosity and their play involving the body.

Support your child's curiosity and play involving the body

- Talk about the body and gender in the same way that you talk to your child about anything else
- Show your child that it is okay to ask, even if you cannot always answer the questions
- Give your child simple answers that are understandable and appropriate to your child's age
- Respect your child's limits of touch and teach your child that it is okay to say "no"
- Ask gently and curiously about your child's experiences of playing "doctor"
- Show your child that you are not going to get angry or scared if they tell you about their experience of playing "doctor"
- Be aware of who your child is playing "doctor" with and ensure that they are only playing with children who are equal in age and maturity
- Talk to the staff at your child's day care institution if you are unsure how to act

For inspiration

Må vi lege doktor? Håndbog i børns seksualitet 0-12 år
Anna Louise Stevnhøj

Spillerum: Et dialogredskab om følelser, grænser og seksualitet. Katrine Zeuthen for Servicestyrelsen 2011
Socialstyrelsen

Billedbøger:

Hemmeligheder

Lisbeth Zornig Andersen og Freja Emilie Palsgaard Andersen.
Dansk Psykologisk Forlag

Blev du til ved et knald?

Trine Bundsgaard. Carlsens Forlag

Mor har en baby inde i maven

Lars Daneskov. Politikens Forlag

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Respect for Boundaries
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