

# CHILDHOOD SEXUALITY



SEX  
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# THE SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN

This booklet is about childhood sexuality. It is for parents of children aged 0 to 6 years and for other adults who play a key role in those children's lives. Sexuality is a fundamental and innate part of human development and well-being, and plays a key role in the formation of any child's identity. This means that most people<sup>1</sup> have an active sexuality throughout their lives – even from a very early age.

For children to develop a positive relationship to their own bodies and sexuality throughout life, they need to be surrounded by adults who dare to assure them that the body can be a source of joy, pleasure and pride.

Sexuality and sex are not the same thing. During childhood, sexuality is part of children's physicality and sensuality, and children learn about themselves and the world by playing with, and exploring their bodies. But sexuality is often a taboo subject, and many adults are unsure of how to talk to children about sexuality, gender, body and boundaries.

Taboo and silence are often the result of parents' fear of violating their child's boundaries or of feeling uncomfortable with their own body and sexuality, thus finding it hard to talk about the subject. Because they are not accustomed to doing so, many adults also find it awkward to talk about sexuality in general, either to their children or to other adults. Consequently, many parents do not talk to their child unless there is some cause for concern.

The Danish Family Planning Association (DFPA) aims to inspire and

<sup>1</sup> Some people identify as asexual and are not sexually attracted to others (see, e.g., [www.aseksuelle.dk/english](http://www.aseksuelle.dk/english)).

support parents in their effort to respond with courage and enthusiasm to their children's curiosity. This booklet features the latest knowledge about children's sexuality and examples of how parents and other key adults can create a safe, positive environment, and opportunities for the physical development, play and self-esteem of children.

## **WHAT IS CHILDHOOD SEXUALITY?**

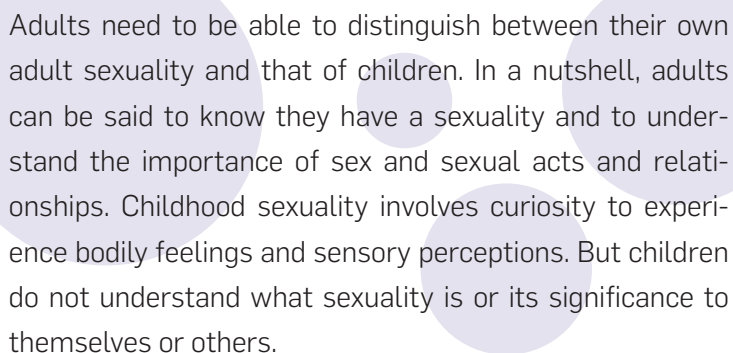
The World Health Organization (WHO) has described and defined sexuality as follows:

*Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.*

*Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors<sup>2</sup>.*

Once we regard sexuality as an innate and positive part of every person's life, development and well-being, it is easier to understand how sexuality finds different expressions at different ages and stages of life. That is why it is important to remember that sex and sexuality are not the same thing. Children explore and discover the world. Childhood sexuality is mainly about being curious about one's own body and those of others, and is reflected in an interest in learning about the body's possibilities through play.

<sup>2</sup> [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)



Adults need to be able to distinguish between their own adult sexuality and that of children. In a nutshell, adults can be said to know they have a sexuality and to understand the importance of sex and sexual acts and relationships. Childhood sexuality involves curiosity to experience bodily feelings and sensory perceptions. But children do not understand what sexuality is or its significance to themselves or others.

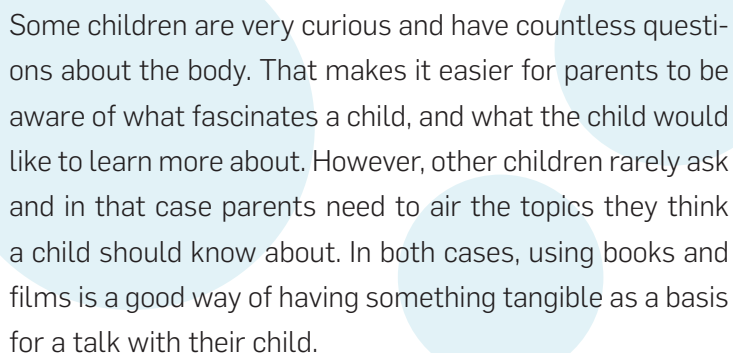
Most children are curious to discover what it feels like to stick beads up their noses or in their ears, and many adults regard this as predictable and innocent. When children want to find out if it is possible to poke a pencil into their bottom or vagina, this is also a reflection of their curiosity. What is different, though, is the reaction of adults. Adults' alarm at children's curiosity about body and sexuality often stems from a notion that sexuality does not emerge until puberty, and that sexuality is the same thing as sex. Many adults are simply unprepared for the fact that children, too, have a sexuality.

But children need adults to be open and to teach them about body, gender identity and sexuality without shame or telling them off. As long as adults adapt the content and communication to suit the age and development of a child, a child is never too young to learn about their own body.

## **NAMING BODY PARTS**

Children are curious about, and interested in their own bodies and those of others, both children and adults. This may find expression in studying themselves in the mirror and showing their bodies to others.

Children also love to investigate how their own bodies are different from those of others, for example, how they pee and what genitals look like. Many children identify with the gender they were assigned at birth; some do not. Whatever genitals a child has, it is important to respect the gender a child identifies as, so the child feels loved for who they are.



Some children are very curious and have countless questions about the body. That makes it easier for parents to be aware of what fascinates a child, and what the child would like to learn more about. However, other children rarely ask and in that case parents need to air the topics they think a child should know about. In both cases, using books and films is a good way of having something tangible as a basis for a talk with their child.

By responding positively to children's curiosity and interest in their own bodies and those of others, we show them that it is just as acceptable to ask and talk about the sexual and sensual aspects of their bodies as it is to learn what arms or ears are for. An important way of showing children that all body parts and genitals are equally good and important is by teaching them the right words for what they are pointing at. By using words to describe the body, children learn to create cohesion between the various functions of body parts and what those body parts feel like in different contexts. Teaching children the right words for their body parts and genitals equips them to notice what feels nice and what is unpleasant; to say yes or no to others; to respect the boundaries of others; and to ask for help when something hurts or is uncomfortable.

The Norwegian psychologist and sexologist, Stéphane Vildalen gives a good example:

*“When children are very young, adults teach them about the body by telling them that a foot is called a ‘foot’, and that a foot has toes and a heel etc. In some situations, a foot has a sock and a shoe on it, and that is a different feeling from a bare foot. Massaging and caressing your foot is nice. So is walking on grass and sand. You can also injure your foot if you walk on broken glass, for instance. That is how a child learns to say, ‘It hurts’, when necessary. Imagine if we taught children that everything from the hips down is called ‘thigh’ and, when a child pointed at a foot, adults looked strange and talked about something else. How on earth would a child react to their nameless body part? Would that child dare to ask or speak up if something hurt? Or enjoy or be curious about that body part that no one talks about?”<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> Stéphane Vildalen: *Seksualitetens betydning for utvikling og relasjoner* (2014)  
8 Gyldendal Akademisk (The DFPA's own translation and summary).





## **LANGUAGE AT HOME AND ELSEWHERE**

Parents may be surprised by, or disagree with the words used by others to articulate the body. Maybe the child starts at day care and learns to say "I need a poo", while at home you use another expression. But children of all ages have no problem with people using different language in different contexts, for example, at home, at day care or school, in their grandparents' home or at the doctor's.

At an early stage, children learn that various words spark various reactions in adults. As a result, children may find it fascinating to push the boundaries in terms of what you may say and where, using words that adults think are inappropriate, for example, calling someone a "fart" or saying "fuck!". Words for body parts and sexuality can also be used to bully, and children need to learn that a single word can be used either to describe the body or to upset others.

*"They may use swear words at home that they learned at day care – 'Shit!', for example. But they may also point at someone, saying "You're a butt!" ... So we try to discuss the fact that, although we have a 'butt', it's something quite different to call someone a butt, and we ask them why they are saying it. Because often they have no idea why they are saying what they're saying. They've just heard other children saying it."*

*- Parent*

## **FEELING BASHFUL OR SHY**

Like adults, children have very different boundaries when it comes to the body. Examples of such boundaries could be when going to the toilet or taking a bath, being at the beach or in a swimming pool. Some children are hugely interested in being naked, in their genitals and bottoms, or in urine and faeces, while others are very private. When a child is shy or bashful it is a way of setting boundaries, and it is vital for adults to show that they respect this. By voicing the fact that you have heard that the child wishes to wear swimwear, you can emphasize that you appreciate when your child expresses their boundaries.

However, if a child's shyness is about the body feeling 'secret', it is important to be able to talk to your child about it. It could be an indication that the child is ashamed of their body or afraid that something is wrong with it. Children learn a lot about where and when to be naked by observing and imitating siblings and parents. Children also detect how the adults around them feel about their own bodies. That is why it is important to be aware of how we talk about our own bodies and those of others when our children are present.

Children are often interested in touching, and asking about adults' bodies, and in this context parents must show their own boundaries in an affectionate and frank manner. Some parents shower with their children, because they think it is both fun and practical. Other parents do not want their children to see them naked. As long as the adults around them encourage and support them in their quest, children will learn what their own boundaries are.

*"I use the word 'private' when setting my own boundaries, for example, when my child wants to look at, and touch me, or when she wants to come to the toilet with me and I don't want that. There's something about the word 'private' that is neutral, with no overtone of guilt and shame. And that's important to me. She is four-and-a-half years old and has started using the word herself. She closes the door to the toilet and says it's 'private'."*

*- Parent*

## **CHILDREN'S MASTURBATION AND SELF-STIMULATION**

Children discover and explore what the bottom and genitals can be used for and touch their own genitals out of curiosity. From the moment a child is born, their genitals are full of nerve endings that make them sensitive and, from a very early age, many children discover that touching their genitals in a particular way or rubbing them against something produces a nice, ticklish feeling. Some children may even have an orgasm<sup>4</sup>. During childhood, masturbation is about discovering that certain places on the body feel particularly nice. This gives many children a sense of calm and security. Some children get frightened or uneasy about getting erections. In that case it may be a good idea to reassure them and tell them it is perfectly normal and equally that the skin can stretch and may hurt a bit.

Some children masturbate while in day care, for example, during their afternoon nap. Some also do it in situations that are inappropriate in the adult world, like during dinner. Most children gradually learn that masturbation is private. Otherwise, it is perfectly acceptable to make

12 <sup>4</sup> *Stéphane Vildalen: Seksualitetens betydning for utvikling og relasjoner (2014)*  
*Gyldendal Akademisk*



*"I think it's important to show my children that the body and genitals are completely natural. So, when I see my 5-year-old lying down watching TV with his hand down his trousers, I try to tackle the subject by saying something like: 'You're touching your willy. Is it a nice feeling?' Of course, you can't ask a question like that everywhere – in a supermarket, for instance. But I think it's so important for them to feel good about their bodies and not be ashamed of them."*

- Parent

a child aware, affirmatively and affectionately, of when and where it is appropriate. Some children enjoy touching themselves; others do not. Both are entirely common.

## **CHILDREN'S PLAY AND RELATIONSHIPS**

Children learn about the world and about themselves through play. Of course, that goes for body, gender and sexuality too. Children's most important relationships with their peers are generally at the day care centre. So, parents are not necessarily aware of all the games their children play. Some parents get surprised and perhaps embarrassed when they discover, or when an educator or another parent tells them that their child has played a game involving body and sexuality.

When children play sexual games with each other, they are exploring: what feels nice, and what does not; how bodies are similar, yet different; how different roles provide different options; and particularly how to negotiate boundaries and agreements in play. Children play sexual games with children they like to play with, regardless of gender. Sometimes a game can involve just two children; sometimes a group. Some games, children prefer to be left alone to play. That way, they get a feeling of privacy. Many parents refer to these games as 'Nurses and Doctors' or 'You show me yours and I'll show you mine'. Try being curious. Listen to how they play the games, and ask what they are about, and what names the children themselves give to their games.

How and with whom a child plays does not necessarily say anything about the child's sexual orientation or gender identity. Nor is there any need to refer to children who play together a lot as 'boyfriends' or 'girlfriends', unless these are terms the children use themselves. In these games, children practise setting boundaries in intimate situations. That is why sexual games are important for children to learn that other children also have sexual interest and imagination, and what feels nice for themselves and others.







## **BOUNDARIES AND CONSENT**

Every child needs to learn that their body is their own. This means that a child must learn to feel and express what feels nice and what is uncomfortable, and decide who may touch their body. Parents can teach children about body awareness from a very early age by explaining when they touch their child's body – when changing their nappy or bathing them – and telling them who may touch their body and in what situations.

Listening to your own bodily signals also makes it easier to understand other people's feelings and boundaries. It is an ability you will use throughout life. So, one of the most important things for a parent to teach their child is how to say yes and no with both words and body language. You can do so by talking to your child about boundaries and agreements when they play with other children and by showing what consent is. Most adults are not used to asking before touching, kissing or hugging their children. But, by articulating what you are offering – a hug or a kiss – and asking whether the child wants it, you are showing them how important their feelings and boundaries are, and that they should be respected – even by parents and other adults with whom the child feels comfortable.

Children's sexual play should be all about curiosity and everyone involved must do so voluntarily. However, as in any game, children like to test how much and what they can decide, and every child will both experience crossing others' boundaries and having their own bounda-

ries crossed – the same as when they hit or push each other. In certain situations, it is difficult for children to assert themselves. That is why it is important for children to know that, even if it happened a while ago, they can always tell an adult if they had an unpleasant experience. Children need to know that, both when someone has crossed their boundary and when they have crossed another child's, an adult is there to help and support them.

Parents can get scared and angry if their child experiences having their boundaries crossed in the day care centre. In this case, it may be good idea to try and distinguish between the child's own experience and reaction, and what feelings it arouses in you. Educators and parents can usually help children to understand and handle an uncomfortable experience between children. But sometimes an episode can create conflict between the adults. In that situation, it is important to concentrate on that and that alone to avoid the children getting tangled up in it.

## **FAMILIES AND BABIES**

Most children find babies cute and fascinating and may be curious about how babies – and themselves – came into this world. When children ask how babies are made, many parents are unsure about how to talk to their children about sex. However, more often than not, that is not actually what the child wants to know! When children ask where they, their siblings or friends 'come from', they want to understand how human beings are created.

There are many different ways to be a family. Not all children were born as a result of parents having sex with each other (and by no means all parents have sex in order to have children). But what all chil-

dren do have in common is the fact that they came into this world as a result of the union of an egg and a sperm that developed into a foetus that grew in a womb. But usually a child also wants to know how they in particular came into the world. So, it is not a bad idea to prepare for how to talk to your child about this. Maybe you have some photos of the newly-born child to show them. Maybe you could also read an illustrated children's book on the subject with them. At the back of this booklet you will find some suggestions for read-aloud books.

## **COLLABORATING WITH EDUCATORS AND OTHER PARENTS**

Many of children's most important playmates are at day care. That makes it vital for the adults around them to collaborate in the best possible way with regard to the children's social well-being, both at home and in the day care centre. According to the Danish Day Care Services Act, social educators and the curricula are obliged to support every aspect of children's well-being and development. This also includes children's bodies, gender identity and sexuality. However, given that sexuality can be such a tricky, taboo subject for many adults, sometimes this aspect of a child's development and well-being can make both parents and staff nervous and silent. You could call it a 'two-way taboo', because neither parents nor staff address the issue. What parents and staff have in common, though, is the fact they both want what is best for the children, and actually do want to be able talk to each other about every aspect of a child's well-being.

Most parents are also very keen to talk to other parents of children in the day care centre, especially when it comes to fixing play dates. Domestic norms vary from family to family, also in terms of nudity and going to the toilet. Bear in mind that the parents of your child's friend

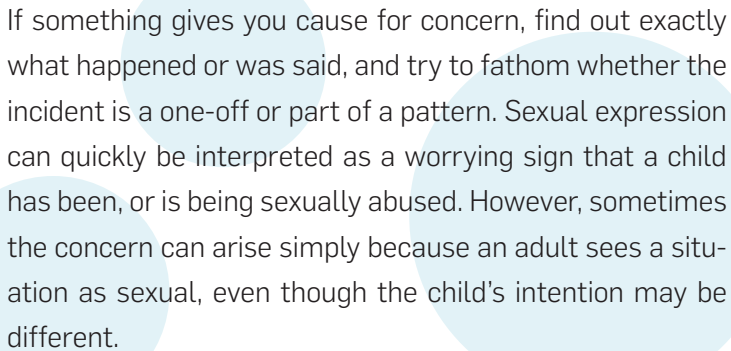
may have different norms from yours, and consider how to address this in a respectful, curious way.

Some conversations are best on the phone; while others can easily take place when you are picking up your child at day care. If you want to share something on the topic of sexuality, think twice before using an intranet (if any). Sexuality can kindle strong feelings and reactions in adults, and a group email can often create more conflict than necessary.

It is advisable to know the standards and rules of the day care centre in relation to children's physical and sexual play, and it is totally acceptable to ask the staff and possibly the board to put sexuality on the agenda for a parents' meeting to provide everyone with a joint understanding of what considerations (or lack of them) went into the creation of their guidelines. Getting an outside speaker to talk about the topic may also be a good idea.

## **IF ANYTHING GIVES CAUSE FOR CONCERN**

Occasionally children do something that causes concern in adults. Parents need to be able to talk to each other, friends or day care staff about what behaviour is expected and common, and what behaviour may actually be alarming. Children's sexual behaviour must always be viewed in the context of their overall well-being, their age and their relationships in various contexts (at home, at the day care centre, or in the company of friends, grandparents etc.).



If something gives you cause for concern, find out exactly what happened or was said, and try to fathom whether the incident is a one-off or part of a pattern. Sexual expression can quickly be interpreted as a worrying sign that a child has been, or is being sexually abused. However, sometimes the concern can arise simply because an adult sees a situation as sexual, even though the child's intention may be different.

The same applies when an adult discovers or hears children talking about the sexual games they play with other children. Try to find out what feelings are associated with the games. Are the games being played by evenly-matched children in terms of age, cognitive development and status? Do the games feature mutual curiosity, respect and excitement?

It may happen that children either get harmed or harm other children – or at least risk doing so. If a game is coloured by coercion, aggression or insecurity, you as an adult must stop the game and find out why the child/children is/are acting that way. In this context, it is important to remember that sexuality is also about satisfying needs, processing experiences and expressing feelings. Sexuality can be a way for a child to seek comfort and closeness or a way to express frustration and sadness. With kindness and curiosity, find out what is going on with the child to cause an inappropriate behaviour. Sometimes we simply need to help a child understand how to respect other children's boundaries. If, even after you have talked to them, a child continues behaving inappropriately, it may be necessary to seek professional help. Your municipality's social, child or health services can direct you to the relevant advice.

## TIPS FOR BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS

*My Feelings and Me* by Holde Kreul (Sky Pony, 2018)

An illustrated read-aloud book that paves the way for conversations about expressing and coping with feelings.

*Your Body is Brilliant: Body Respect for Children* by Sigrun Danielsdóttir & Björk Bjarkadóttir (Singing Dragon, 2014)

A picture book about all the things the body can do and how important it is to listen to it and take care of it.

*What makes a baby* by Cory Silverberg & Fiona Smyth (Seven Stories Press, 2012)

A colourful illustrated book about how babies are made.

*My Body Belongs to Me!* by Dagmar Geisler (Skyhorse Publishing, 2014)

A read-aloud book for talking to children about their right to their own body. Using various situations, it shows how some touching can be nice and other not.

*C is for Consent* by Eleanor Morrison & Faye Orlove (Phonics with Finn, 2018)

A book that teaches babies, toddlers, parents, and grandparents that it is okay for kids to say no to hugs and kisses.

*The body book* by Roz MacLean (Promontory Press Inc., 2017)

A fun rhyming book about body diversity and acceptance.



## **ABOUT THE DANISH FAMILY PLANNING ASSOCIATION (DFPA)**

The DFPA is an NGO that works to promote the universal right to decide over your own body and sexuality.

In Denmark, we train professionals and provide children and young people with knowledge about gender, body and sexuality through comprehensive sexuality education, campaigns and online counselling on Sexlinien.dk and Privatsnak.dk. Together with partner organizations in developing countries, we work to increase gender equality and access to contraceptives, sexuality education, and health services.



**PurePrint® by KLS**

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ISBN: 978-87-93654-20-4

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