



## SEXUAL HEALTH DEVELOPMENTAL CHART

### HOW YOUR CHILD DEVELOPS

- Normal Sexual Development
- Healthy Sexual Development
- Sexual Health Promotion and Prevention of Abuse

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**preventioninstitute**  
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# Introduction

The World Health Organization defines sexual health as a state of physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence. ([http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/gender\\_rights/sexual\\_health/en/](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/gender_rights/sexual_health/en/))

It is important that health and childcare providers have a basic knowledge of the development of sexuality from infancy to adolescence. Although many people believe that sexuality begins with puberty, sexual development in fact begins in infancy.

Children grow through various stages of sexual development including gender identity and gender roles as well as their understanding of relationships, sexuality, family, cultural, or moral values. Social interaction and engaging in appropriate sexual behaviours is one of the important elements of growing up.

Parents and caregivers are the first and primary sexual health educators of children. They indirectly teach infants and toddlers about sexuality through interactions on a number of levels, including the way parents speak, cuddle and play with their children. Children continue to learn about sexuality as they grow and interact socially through the development of relationships with family members and peers.

Children also learn a great deal about sexuality simply by observing other people's interactions with the world around them. Although children will receive instruction from schools on relevant sexual issues such as healthy body image, personal safety, puberty, and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, parents and caregivers have an important role in reinforcing these health and safety messages.

The outline of the sexual health developmental chart includes developmental stages defined by age. The age range of 0-16 years is divided into five age groupings: 0-2, 2-5, 5-8, 9-12 and 13-16. Each age category has information and messages for parents regarding normal development and the prevention of sexual abuse.



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# Notes

There are some important things to keep in mind when speaking to parents or teenagers while using this chart.

First, although there are stages in the sexual development of children, the achievement of sexual development is often gradual and may not occur in the outlined pattern.

Second, as with areas of a child's growth and development, there are variations in the rate and nature of sexual development. Thus, although the five age groupings used here are convenient and useful, reflecting basic stages in the development of childhood sexuality, they should not be seen as rigid dividing lines in the course of sexual development. There may be considerable overlap between the age groupings in terms of what to expect in a child's sexual development.

Third, the information on normal sexual development and the messages for parents refers to behaviours observed in children who are on the path to healthy sexual development. This does not mean that a child must engage in these behaviours to be healthy or that most or all children necessarily engage in these behaviours.

Should a parent or teenager have any concerns about sexual development that are not addressed in this resource, please refer them to their family physician and/or child-youth community mental health services.

# Birth-2 Years

## Normal Sexual Development

- Explores own body, including genitals.
- Enjoys touch as well as skin to skin contact.
- Likes to be naked.



## MESSAGES FOR PARENTS

### Healthy Sexual Development

- Your child will develop the capacity to trust caregivers.
- Your child will experience pleasure through touch.
- Teach your child the correct names of body parts including genitals (e.g. vagina, penis, clitoris, scrotum, vulva, breasts, and buttocks).

### Promotion of Sexual Health and Prevention of Sexual Abuse

- Throughout your child's development be aware of possible signs of sexual abuse (e.g. trauma to the genitals, resistant or fearful of touch from others, and sexualized behaviour/inappropriate sexual behaviour).

# Notes: Birth-2 Years

The major way of learning at this stage is through the senses. Babies feel loved and secure through their relationships with primary caregivers. This gives them the ability to trust and experience pleasure.

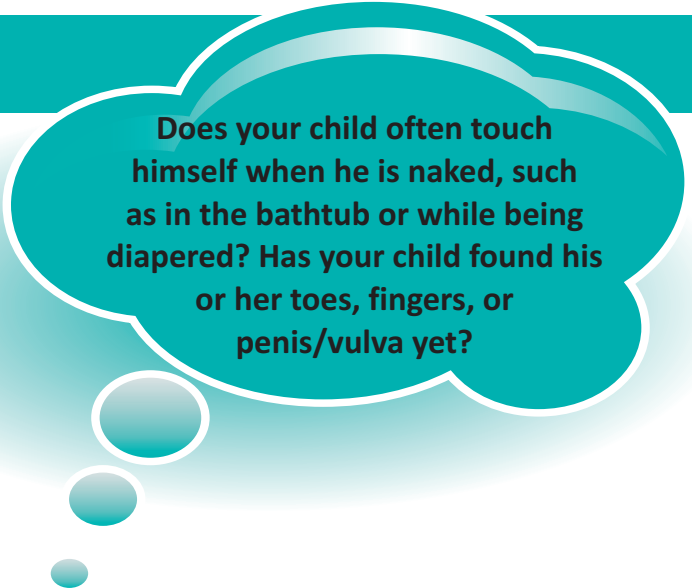
Boys may begin to realize that they have penises at around 7 or 8 months (the same time as they understand other body parts, e.g., hands and feet), and girls may discover their vulva at around 9 or 10 months. Natural reflex responses to touch or friction and/or a tendency to empty their bladders may lead to erections in the boys or vulval lubrications in the girls.

Parents and caregivers should make use of appropriate times to begin to teach their children the proper names for body parts. This will help a child to be comfortable with his/her own body. During the first 18 months of life, children are beginning to learn the differences between males and females and beginning the process of identifying themselves as either male or female.

At two years of age, most children may also begin to recognize that the people around them are identified as either female or male. This is part of the gender identity and gender role development of a child.

## HEALTHY PARENTING

- Skin-to-skin contact with mom and dad.
- It is important that parents kiss, hug, snuggle, smile and talk with their children as part of healthy development.



**Does your child often touch himself when he is naked, such as in the bathtub or while being diapered? Has your child found his or her toes, fingers, or penis/vulva yet?**

# 2-5 Years

## Normal Sexual Development

- Identifies self as a boy or a girl.
- Is curious about the genitalia of peers and adults of the same and opposite sex.
- Begins to understand the concept of privacy in relation to nudity and sexuality.
- Is able to understand the basic elements of human reproduction.



## MESSAGES FOR PARENTS

### Healthy Sexual Development

- Do not scold your child for demonstrating normal developmental behaviour such as talking about private parts or attempting to see other people when they are naked or undressing.
- Avoid instilling a sense of guilt or shame.
- Explain to your child that touching his or her genitals is a private act.
- Understand that your reaction to the opposite sex or nudity will influence the child's perception of sexuality, gender and sexual behaviour.
- Answer questions honestly with the facts. Short answers are the best. Give only as much detail as the child asks for.

### Promotion of Sexual Health and Prevention of Sexual Abuse

#### *Teach your child*

- Proper names for body parts.
- That his or her body belongs to him or her.
- That he or she has a right to privacy.
- The difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch.
- That he or she should never be bribed or tricked to do things that make him or her uncomfortable.



# Notes: 2-5 Years

The sexual development in this age group is a continuation of the key growth processes that began in infancy.

At this stage, children will have become quite familiar with their own bodies. They may start to become more interested and curious about the bodies of others, both adults and children.

Parents should continue to make use of available opportunities to teach accurate names for the genitalia and introduce the concept of privacy. Children need to learn that nudity and sexuality are private and not public acts.


During this stage, curiosity about the genitalia of peers can be seen in form of games such as “I’ll show you mine, if you

show me yours” as well as “Playing Doctor” or “Playing House” and trying out roles such as “Mommy” and “Daddy”. These are typical ways that children are able to see how other children’s bodies, including their genitals, are similar to and different from their own.

During this stage, questions about human reproduction may come in the form of “Where did I come from?” or “Where do babies come from?” Children may be curious at the sight of a pregnant woman. Basic but accurate explanations will suffice since the entire and detailed process of human reproduction is complex and children at this stage may not be able to understand fully. This information can serve as a building block for future learning.

## HEALTHY PARENTING

- Encourage your child to always tell you if someone is touching them inappropriately.



**Does your child know the proper names of the body parts?**

# 5-8 Years

## Normal Sexual Development

- Begins to participate in curiosity based sex/sex role play with the same or opposite sex friends.
- May begin to show early signs of puberty (*e.g., growth of pubic hair, breast development*).
- Develops sense of gender identity (*understanding that they are male or female*).
- May have a basic understanding of sexual orientation (*heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality*).



## MESSAGES FOR PARENTS

### Healthy Sexual Development

- Provide your child with basic information about the human reproductive system, including sexual intercourse.
- Begin to prepare your child for the physical changes associated with puberty.
- Reaffirm with your child the correct names for body parts (*e.g. vagina, penis, clitoris, scrotum, vulva, breasts, and buttocks*).
- Avoid the use of slang words to describe body parts and sexuality.

### Promotion of Sexual Health and Prevention of Sexual Abuse

- Watch for signs of possible sexual abuse or exploitation (*e.g. physical traumas to the genitals, sexually related behavioural acts, and early initiation of sexual acts*).
- Introduce your child to information and social norms related to the role of sexuality in relationships.
- Reinforce and expand your child's knowledge of his/her rights, *e.g. "your body belongs to you"* and the responsibilities related to sexuality (*e.g. equal relationships*).

# Notes: 5-8 Years

At this stage, there is a renewed interest in gender role. This can be seen in behaviours such as showing strong preference for gender typed clothing and activities.


It is important for parents and caregivers to educate their children about the basic aspects of human reproduction, including the role of sexual intercourse in the reproductive process. This is necessary to prevent misconceptions about sexuality and reproduction.

Many children in this age range will become aware of issues related to sexual orientation. It is important that parents and caregivers explain to children the concepts of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality.

Parents need to know that there may be early signs of puberty at the later part of this stage, particularly with girls showing signs of puberty, such as breast development and the growth of pubic hair. This is completely normal. Consequently, children at this age should receive basic, age-appropriate information related to puberty.

## HEALTHY PARENTING

- It is important that parents share their family and cultural values in regards to sexuality, but also remain open to all questions that children might have.



**Does your child know where babies come from?**

# 9-12 Years

## Normal Sexual Development

- May undergo physical changes associated with puberty.
- May begin to show emotional, psychological, and social changes associated with puberty.



## MESSAGES FOR PARENTS

### Healthy Sexual Development

- Teach your child what to expect and how to cope with the changes of puberty.
- Teach your child to recognize and avoid risky social situations.
- Teach your child about healthy relationships.

### Promotion of Sexual Health and Prevention of Sexual Abuse

- Encourage your child to tell someone he/she trusts if he/she has been or is being sexually abused, exploited or bullied.
- Teach your child to maintain safety and personal boundaries when chatting or meeting people online.



# Notes: 9-12 Years

This is the beginning of a rapid transition from childhood to adolescence. For girls these changes include breast development and the appearance of hair in the pubic area and underarms. Most girls begin menstruation during this time. Puberty in boys starts slightly later than girls. The first sign of puberty in boys is the enlargement of the testes, followed by growth of the penis and later the pubic hair. As children enter puberty, they enter a period of heightened sexuality. Nearly all youth at this phase of development are preoccupied to some extent with sexuality.

Puberty is typically the time where sexual feelings are heightened and adolescents may begin to experiment with masturbation; some will masturbate regularly and some will do so infrequently or not at all.


Socially, youth entering puberty will be more comfortable spending time with their peers most of the time. Typically, such peer relationships do not involve sexual intercourse. Youth of this age are much more likely to kiss and hug, while breast and genital touching are less likely but not uncommon.

It is clear that if sexual health education is to meaningfully assist youth in promoting and enhancing their sexual health and wellbeing, we must provide relevant information, teach them healthy relationship skills, and provide emotional support before they become sexually active.

9 to 12 years is a critical period for the provision of sexual health education.

## HEALTHY PARENTING

- It is important that parents use teachable moments to have conversations about body changes and sexual feelings.
- Personal hygiene needs to be taught at this stage.



**Does your child understand  
sex and reproduction  
in clear terms?**

# 13-16 Years

## Normal Sexual Development

- May be preoccupied with sexuality (e.g., interest in sexual media).
- May be preoccupied with body image.
- May start to engage in sexual activities as a way to physically express sexual and romantic feelings and to give or receive pleasure.
- May become sexually active.



## MESSAGES FOR PARENTS

### Healthy Sexual Development

- Talk to your child about how to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections through the use of condoms and birth control.
- Encourage teenagers to see a health care provider to learn about the choices available for prevention of sexually transmitted infections and unexpected pregnancies.
- Provide an environment that promotes self-esteem and positive body image.
- Reinforce safe sex practices and the avoidance of risky sexual behaviours.
- Provide opportunities for discussions regarding healthy choices in relationships, abstinence, and prevention techniques.

### Promotion of Sexual Health and Prevention of Sexual Abuse

- Watch for early signs of premature sexual activities as well as overt sexualized behaviours.
- Encourage a healthy lifestyle and positive relationships.
- Discourage drugs and alcohol use because they can affect choices related to sexual behaviours.

# Notes: 13-16 Years

This is the middle adolescence phase. During this time, children's thinking skills take a more mature turn with increased abstract thinking ability. At this time, full physical maturation is attained and the adolescent may become sexually active. Friends and social networks outside of the family become increasingly important.

At this time, children can become preoccupied with body image. This can lead to lowered self-esteem and eating disorders. Therefore, parents and other caregivers should watch for signs of poor academic performance, missing school or withdrawal in their children.


Denial of the consequences of sexual behaviour is typical at this stage. Encourage teenagers to see a healthcare provider to learn about the choices available for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections and unexpected pregnancies.

Peer counseling can be effective at this stage.

Parents and caregivers need to model healthy lifestyles and relationships. Parents need to be available and ready when their teen needs help or advice.

## HEALTHY PARENTING

- Parents should set the stage for continued conversations and openness. Teens look to parents for sexual health information more than friends.
- Educate your teen about prevention of sexually transmitted infections.



**Does your child understand healthy relationships?**

# References

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2009). *Sexual Development and Behavior in Children: Information for Parents and Caregivers*. Retrieved March 23, 2012, from <http://www.nctsn.org/products/sexual-development-and-behavior-children-information-parents-and-caregivers-2009>

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (n.d.). *Sexuality and Childhood Development*. Retrieved March 23, 2012, from <http://www.sexualityandu.ca/parents>

# Resources

The best time to start communicating healthy sexual information with your child is in the early stages of development. It is important that you become comfortable talking about sex with him or her. Your child may come to you with questions about sex, sexuality, and sex-related matters. Remember, you do not need to know all the answers, but you do want to be a reliable educator for your child.

To become more comfortable with discussions on sexual development, we encourage you to visit your local library or bookstores for books and DVDs. Remember to choose materials carefully; some may be more explicit than you thought. Think about the level of detail that would be good for your child's stage of development and his or her personal preference.

Below is a list of recommended websites:

1. Information and resources for parents on children's sexuality.  
<https://teachingsexualhealth.ca/parents>
2. *Sexual Development and Behavior in Children: Information for Parents and Caregivers*  
[https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/sexual\\_development\\_and\\_behavior\\_in\\_children.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/sexual_development_and_behavior_in_children.pdf)
3. Stewart Resource Centre of the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation.  
[www.stf.sk.ca](http://www.stf.sk.ca)



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3. Stewart Resource Centre of the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation.  
[www.stf.sk.ca](http://www.stf.sk.ca)

# Saskatchewan Prevention Institute

*Our mission is to reduce the occurrence of disabling conditions in children.*

## About the Prevention Institute

The Saskatchewan Prevention Institute is a non-profit organization that focuses on primary prevention to reduce the occurrence of disabling conditions in children.

Formed in 1980, the Prevention Institute is unique in Canada. The Institute is guided by a Board of Directors, an Executive Committee, a Medical Advisory Committee, and a Program Advisory Committee.

## PARTNERS IN PREVENTION

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