

SEXUAL HEALTH DEVELOPMENT CHART



HOW YOUR CHILD DEVELOPS

Including:

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

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Saskatchewan Prevention Institute

Our mandate is to help all children thrive through primary prevention and the promotion of well-being. Our goal is healthy children.

About the Prevention Institute

The Saskatchewan Prevention Institute is a non-profit organization founded in 1980. We are committed to working collaboratively to promote primary prevention throughout the province. We share evidence-based information through print and web-based resources. We provide education and training in all of our areas of focus. We believe children of all abilities have the right to the best physical, social, and emotional health possible.

The Saskatchewan Prevention Institute is guided by a Board of Directors, an Executive Committee, a Medical Advisory Committee, and a Program Advisory Committee.

PARTNERS IN PREVENTION

- Community-at-Large
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Introduction

The World Health Organization defines sexual health as a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality¹. 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. (<https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health>)

It is important that health and childcare providers have basic knowledge of sexual development to help promote sexual health in their interactions with children and to support parents as sexual health educators for their children. Although many people believe that sexuality begins with puberty, sexual development in fact begins in infancy.

As children grow through the various stages of sexual development, they begin to understand concepts including gender identity and gender roles, relationships, and family, cultural, and moral values. Social interactions and engaging in appropriate sexual behaviours are important elements of growing up.

Parents and caregivers are the first and primary sexual health educators of children. Parents and caregivers indirectly teach children about sexuality through daily interactions, including the way they 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 health issues such as building healthy relationships, 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 Development 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 healthy sexual development, the promotion of sexual health, and the prevention of sexual abuse.

¹Sexuality "encompasses all aspects of sexual behaviour, including gender identity, orientation, attitudes, and activity" (<https://www.apa.org/topics/sex-sexuality>). Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of several factors including biological, psychological, social, economic, historical, and spiritual factors (<https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health>).

SEXUAL HEALTH DEVELOPMENT CHART



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Notes

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

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

Second, as with many 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, 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 included refers to behaviours and understandings of 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. As mentioned previously, there are variations in the rate and nature of sexual development.

Should a parent or caregiver have any concerns about sexual development, please refer them to their primary care provider and/or child-youth community mental health services. A list of helpful resources is also provided at the end of this flipchart.

Please note: The Saskatchewan Prevention Institute recognizes the importance of being fully inclusive. As such, gender-neutral language is used whenever possible. When the terms "male" and "female" are used, it is with the purpose of referring to sex-related biological features (internal and external anatomy), not to gender identity.

Birth-2 Years

At this age, many children will:

- Explore their own body, including genitals.
- Enjoy touch as well as skin-to-skin contact.
- Like 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.
- Begin to teach your child how to respectfully interact with others (e.g., soft touch, taking turns).

Promotion of Sexual Health and Prevention of Sexual Abuse

- Teach your child the correct names for body parts including genitals (e.g., penis, scrotum, vulva, vagina, buttocks). This promotes positive body image and builds the foundation for future discussions about appropriate and inappropriate touch.
- Teach your child to say “no” to unwanted touch or behaviours, regardless of who is approaching them.
- Throughout your child’s development, be aware of possible signs of sexual abuse (e.g., trauma to the genitals, resistant to or fearful of touch from others, and sexualized/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.

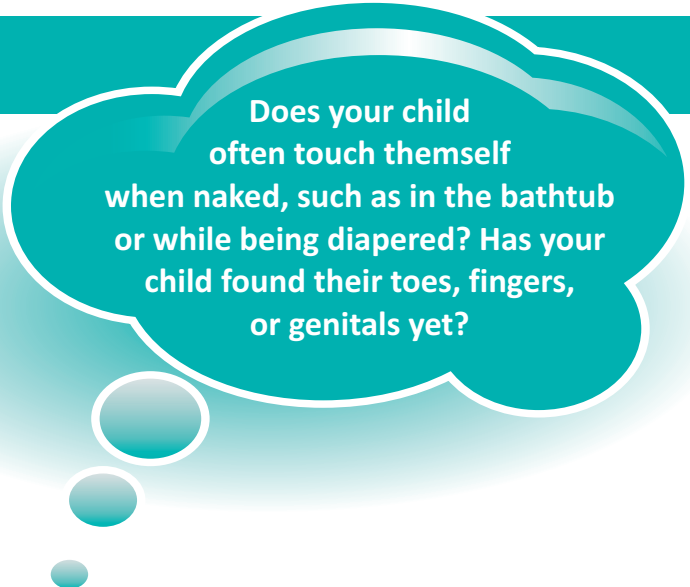
Males may begin to realize that they have a penis at around 7 or 8 months (the same time as they understand other body parts like their hands and feet), and females may discover their vulva at around 9 or 10 months. Natural reflex responses to touch or friction and/or a tendency to empty their bladders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

Parents and caregivers should make use of everyday situations to teach their child the proper names for body parts. This will help children feel comfortable with their own body, and also help to build the foundation for future discussions about sexual health and appropriate and inappropriate touch.

As children move through this stage, they will begin interacting with others, including through play. Parents should begin to teach their child how to respectfully interact with others. For instance, parents can reinforce the need for gentle/soft touch and taking turns.

HEALTHY PARENTING

- Skin-to-skin contact with primary caregivers.
- It is important that caregivers kiss, hug, snuggle, smile, and talk with their child as part of healthy development.



Does your child often touch themselves when naked, such as in the bathtub or while being diapered? Has your child found their toes, fingers, or genitals yet?

2-5 Years

At this age, many children will:

- Identify their own gender and the gender of others.
- Begin to participate in role play and activities to explore aspects of sexuality (e.g., pretending to be “Mommy” or “Daddy”, playing house or doctor).
- Be curious about the genitals of peers and adults of the same and opposite sex.
- Be able to understand the basic elements of human reproduction.



MESSAGES FOR PARENTS

Healthy Sexual Development

- Avoid instilling a sense of guilt or shame. Do not scold your child for demonstrating normal developmental behaviours such as talking about body parts or attempting to see other people when they are naked or undressing.
- Understand that your reaction to the opposite sex or nudity will influence your child’s perception of sexuality, gender, and sexual behaviour.
- Explain privacy to your child, including the difference between public and private acts (e.g., places for undressing, touching their genitals).
- 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, including genitals
- that their body belongs to them
- that they have a right to privacy and the right to say “no” to unwanted touch or behaviours
- the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch

Notes: 2-5 Years

The sexual development of 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. Children may start to become more interested and curious about the bodies of others, both adults and children.


Children will identify their own gender and recognize the genders of people around them. As part of this development, curiosity about the genitals and genders of peers may be seen in the form of games such as “I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours”, trying out roles such as “Mommy” and “Daddy”, and playing doctor or house. This is part of the gender identity and gender role development of a child.

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 person. Providing age-appropriate and accurate explanations to children is important to educate them and prevent misinformation. This information serves as a building block for future learning.

Parents should continue to use and teach accurate names for body parts to children, including genitals. Teaching children about privacy, including the differences between public and private acts (e.g., places for undressing, touching their genitals) is important during this stage of development. Parents should also teach children that their body belongs to them and they have the right to say “no” to unwanted touch or behaviours.

HEALTHY PARENTING

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



Does your child know the proper names for body parts?

5-8 Years

At this age, many children will:

- Gain a deeper understanding of gender roles and develop a sense of gender identity (e.g., understanding that they are male, female, nonbinary).
- Have a preference for same-gender friendships and “gendered” activities, clothing, and behaviours to express their gender.
- Have a basic understanding of sexual orientation (e.g., heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality).
- Begin to show early signs of puberty (e.g., growth of pubic hair, breast development).



MESSAGES FOR PARENTS

Healthy Sexual Development

- Provide your child with basic information about the human reproductive system, including sexual intercourse.
- Prepare your child for the physical changes associated with puberty.
- Continue to use the correct names for body parts (e.g., penis, scrotum, vulva, vagina, 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 trauma to the genitals, sexually related behavioural acts, and early initiation of sexual acts).
- Reinforce and expand your child’s knowledge of their rights (e.g., “your body belongs to you”) and the responsibilities related to sexuality (e.g., equal relationships, boundaries, consent).
- Teach your child to think critically. Discuss how norms and values related to gender, relationships, and family are influenced by society and the media.

Notes: 5-8 Years

At this stage, children gain a deeper understanding of gender roles and develop a sense of gender identity. This can be seen in behaviours such as showing a strong preference for “gendered” clothing, activities, and behaviours. Children in this stage often have a preference for same-gender friendships.


It is important for parents and caregivers to educate their child about the basic aspects of human reproduction, including the role of sexual intercourse in the reproductive process. This is necessary to prevent misconceptions about sexual health and reproduction, and to help ensure children have the information they need to make informed decisions in the future.

Many children in this age range will gain an understanding of sexual orientation. It is important that parents and caregivers discuss concepts of sexual orientation (e.g., heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality) with their child.

Parents need to know that there may be early signs of puberty at the later part of this stage, particularly with females (e.g., breast development and the growth of pubic hair). This is completely normal. 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 regarding sexuality, but also remain open to all questions that children might have.



Does your child know where babies come from?

9-12 Years

At this age, many children will:

- Undergo physical changes associated with puberty.
- Begin to show emotional, psychological, and social changes associated with puberty, including an increased desire for privacy and independence.
- Some children may also begin to experience romantic feelings, like “crushes”.



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 deal with potentially risky social situations.
- Show interest in your child’s relationships with peers and support them in building healthy relationships.
- Talk about myths or misconceptions about sex, sexuality, and gender that your child may learn from peers or the media. Remind your child that media messages do not reflect reality.

Promotion of Sexual Health and Prevention of Sexual Abuse

- Teach your child about safety, privacy, and boundaries when sharing information or chatting online.
- Encourage your child to tell someone they trust if they have been or are being sexually abused, exploited, or bullied.

Notes: 9-12 Years

This is the beginning of a rapid transition from childhood to adolescence. For females, these changes include breast development and the appearance of hair in the pubic area and underarms. Most females begin menstruation during this time. Puberty in males starts slightly later than females. The first sign of puberty in males is the enlargement of the testes, followed by growth of the penis and pubic hair.


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

Youth entering puberty have an increased desire for privacy, independence, and time spent with peers. Typically, peer relationships in this age group 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.

The natural interest of youth during this time means they are particularly receptive and motivated to gain knowledge and skills related to sexual health. Ideally, youth should be educated about healthy relationships, consent, and safer sex before they begin dating or become sexually active. Parents should also cover topics such as puberty, personal hygiene, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy prevention.

HEALTHY PARENTING

- It is important that parents use everyday 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

At this age, many children will:

- Understand or begin exploring their sexual orientation (which gender(s) they are attracted to).
- Have “crushes”, romantic feelings, or begin dating.
- Be preoccupied with sexuality (e.g., interest in sexual media) and body image.
- Start to engage in sexual activities as a way to physically express sexual and romantic feelings and to give or receive pleasure.



MESSAGES FOR PARENTS

Healthy Sexual Development

- Talk to your child about safer sex practices, including how to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections through the use of condoms and birth control.
- Encourage your child to see a healthcare provider to learn about the choices available for prevention of sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies.
- Provide an environment that promotes self-esteem and positive body image.
- Remain interested in your child’s relationships. Provide opportunities for discussions about healthy choices in relationships, including the importance of consent.

Promotion of Sexual Health and Prevention of Sexual Abuse

- Watch for early signs of premature sexual activities as well as overly sexualized behaviours.
- Encourage a healthy lifestyle and positive relationships.
- Substance use can affect healthy decisions, including those related to sexual behaviours. Educate your child about drugs and alcohol so they can make informed choices.

Notes: 13-16 Years

This is the middle adolescence phase. Children continue to go through physical changes associated with puberty during this time. Children also often experience attraction to others and begin exploring their sexual orientation. They may start to engage in sexual activities to express sexual and romantic feelings and to give or receive pleasure.

At this time, children can become preoccupied with sexuality (e.g., interest in sexual media) and body image. This can lead to lowered self-esteem and disordered eating. Parents and caregivers should watch for potential signs of mental health difficulties such as poor academic performance, changes in mood, and changes in eating habits.

Children continue to desire privacy and independence. Friends and social networks outside of the family become increasingly important during this stage. Parents should remain interested in their child's relationships and be willing to use everyday moments to discuss healthy relationships, conflict resolution, informed decision making, and consent.

Substance use can impair healthy decision making, including decisions related to sexual behaviours. It is important that parents provide education about drugs and alcohol to their child so they can make informed decisions. Encourage children to see a healthcare provider to learn about the choices available for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections and unexpected pregnancies.

HEALTHY PARENTING

- Parents should set the stage for continued conversations and openness. Youth look to parents for sexual health information more than their friends.
- Educate your child about safer sex practices.



Parents and caregivers should try their best to model healthy lifestyles and relationships.

Resources

The best time to start communicating sexual health information with your child is in the early stages of development. 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. Take time to find accurate answers to your child's questions and return to the conversation when you feel comfortable and prepared.

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 their personal preference.

Below is a list of recommended resources:

1. An Overview of Healthy Childhood Sexual Development, National Sexual Violence Resource Center
www.nsvrc.org/publications/an-overview-on-healthy-childhood-sexual-development
2. It's Easier Than You Think: Tips for Talking With Your Kids About Sexual Health, Saskatchewan Prevention Institute
www.skprevention.ca/sexual-health/information-for-parents/
3. Sexual Development and Behavior in Children: Information for Parents and Caregivers, The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/sexual_development_and_behavior_in_children.pdf
4. Stages of Child Sexual Development, Centre for Sexuality
www.centreforsexuality.ca/learning-centre/stages-of-child-sexual-development/
5. Teaching Sexual Health for Parents
www.teachingsexualhealth.ca/parents/