

What is child sexual development?

Sexual development is an expected and healthy part of a child's overall development. Children begin learning about bodies, relationships, affection, boundaries and consent from early childhood, continuing throughout adolescence and adulthood.

Sexual development is broader than sex. It includes children's understanding of their own bodies and those of other people, privacy, relationships, feelings, growing up and personal boundaries.



Understanding sexual development

Most sexual behaviours displayed by children are developmentally expected and are part of how children learn about bodies, relationships and boundaries. "Developmentally expected" refers to behaviours that a child could display when taking into account their age and individual development. It does not mean children are expected to display sexual behaviours.

Developmentally expected sexual behaviours are generally:

- curiosity-driven
- spontaneous
- infrequent
- easily redirected
- occurring between children of a similar age and developmental stage.

Some children may need guidance from adults about appropriate boundaries, privacy and settings for these behaviours.

Adults can support healthy sexual development by:

- talking openly and calmly about bodies and relationships
- using correct names for body parts
- teaching consent, privacy and respectful relationships

- responding to questions without shame or judgement
- guiding children towards appropriate boundaries and settings
- supporting parents and carers to have age-appropriate conversations.



Helpful responses

Examples:

- "It's okay to be curious about bodies."
- "Bodies are private."
- "We listen when someone says stop."
- "Touching your penis (or other private body part) needs to happen in a private space."

Further support may be needed when behaviours:

- are persistent despite guidance
- involve fear, coercion or secrecy
- are not developmentally expected
- Interfere with participating with others or other activities
- cause harm or distress

Further information

Together We Can is currently being piloted. Public access to the site is expected to be available in coming months.

