

Sexual curiosity



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Sexual Curiosity Taken from Growing Concerns -- A parenting question-and-answer column with Dr. Martha Erickson Question: I've recently started doing child care in my home for several young children and I've observed some sexual curiosity that I'm not quite sure what to make of. Can you provide some guidelines about what is normal for young children and any problem signs that I ought to be aware of? Answer: Sexual curiosity is a natural phenomenon in children of all ages, but it does demand a careful response so that children develop a healthy respect for themselves and others.

In general, this is what you might expect for children from infancy through the early school years. Birth to 2 years Babies explore their bodies with their hands, with no shame or sexual meaning attached to the behavior. In little boys, erections are a natural reflex, especially during diapering. Preschool years Young preschoolers are openly curious--asking, looking, touching. They figure out, " I'm a girl, you're a boy," and wonder about the similarities and differences.

As they begin to discover the shock value with adults, they may use sex words and bathroom humor, often with little or no understanding of the meaning. It is not unusual for preschoolers to use masturbation for self-comfort when they are alone. Elementary school years As sexuality takes on new meaning, elementary aged children become more secretive about exploration (playing doctor with a friend, for example) and gradually become more modest about their bodies. They are curious about romantic and sexual fantasies, but often are vague or confused about details.

Although it is normal and healthy to express an interest in sexual things, there are red flags that caregivers should be aware of: Preoccupation with sexual things (e. g. , the child can't seem to stop talking about sexual things). Acting out sexual behavior that involves force or violence. These behaviors suggest the possibility that the child either has been sexually abused or has witnessed explicit sexual behavior or sexual violence at home or elsewhere. Even seeing media images of sex can be very disturbing to children.

And when children act out what they see in films or TV, it can set up a dangerous domino effect on other children. As with all aspects of child rearing, it is important that you work in partnership with the parents of children in your care. With regard to sexual curiosity, you and the parents would do well to agree on clear limits about the sexual language and behavior that are acceptable, monitor and regulate the children's exposure to inappropriate television programs and give clear messages about respectful, loving sexuality.

And if you suspect that a child in your care has a problem, talk with the parents right away so that they can seek advice from their pediatrician or other professional. Editor's note: Dr. Martha Farrell Erickson, director of the University of Minnesota's Children, Youth and Family Consortium, invites your questions on child rearing for possible inclusion in this column. You may fax them to (612) 624-6369 or send them to Growing Concerns, University of Minnesota News Service, 6 Morrill Hall, 100 Church St. S. E. , Minneapolis, MN 55455.