



Understanding Typical Healthy Child Development: An Important Tool to Keep Children Safe

An understanding of typical child development helps parents and caregivers understand and nurture a child as he or she grows and learns. Children who understand the stages of development are less likely to become victims of child sexual abuse.



Typical Healthy Development of Children

Tips for Adults to Support Typical Healthy Development of Children

Infancy - Birth to Age 2

- Learn about love and trust through loving relationships with parents and caregivers
- Learn about body through sense of touch
- Notice differences between boys and girls – children and adults
- Enjoy nudity

- Name body parts, including genitals, using correct names
- Model “comfortable” touch (i.e. hugs that are not forced on the child)
- Talk about boundaries as the opportunity arises (i.e. during diapering and bath time tell children their genitals are “private parts” and “off-limits” to others)

Toddler and Preschool Years Ages 2 to 5

- Learn to name body parts – teach children the actual names for their private parts (i.e. penis and vagina)
- Begin to identify as either male or female
- Show an interest in the differences between boys and girls
- Interested in privacy for themselves, yet be very interested in bathroom activities of others
- Curious about where they came from
- Begin to learn about personal boundaries
- Likely to play house, doctor or other forms of body exploration

- Encourage children to use correct names of body parts and to identify their “private parts”
- Model the importance of privacy during bathing and toileting
- Give child permission to be private about his/her own nudity
- Acknowledge touching oneself feels good, is OK and may be done in private
- Teach children to respect other people’s bodies and privacy
- Teach children the difference between comfortable/appropriate touch and uncomfortable/inappropriate touch
- Do not force them to have physical contact with others (such as hugging adults)

Middle Childhood Ages 5 to 8

- Develop strong friendships with children of same sex
- Desire to be like their peers – to be included
- Understand differences between males and females
- Display basic understanding of puberty
- Display basic understanding of human reproduction
- Exhibit increasing modesty and interest in privacy in bathroom and dressing activities

- Respect child’s need for privacy
- Reinforce child’s need to respect other people’s bodies, boundaries and need for privacy
- Teach children about male and female puberty (by 7 - 8 years old)
- It is important to remember research has shown children whose parents talk with them about sexuality are less likely to become sexually active at an early age





This publication is funded in part by a grant from the Child Victim's Trust Fund.

This project is funded in part or in whole with state or federal funds through a contract (#PON2 736 1400001748 2) with the KY Cabinet for Health and Family Services.



Typical Healthy Development of Children

Tips for Adults to Support Typical Healthy Development of Children

Late Childhood / Tweens Ages 9 to 12

- Boys experience changes in voice and the penis and testicles mature
- Girls begin having periods and develop breasts
- Begin to grow pubic hair
- Sometimes engage in some mutual, same gender exploration and sex play
- Feel uncomfortable undressing in front of others
- Continue to value same sex friendships – may share information about sexuality with friends of the same gender
- Enjoy being like their peers and dressing and speaking the same
- Often engage in swearing and conversations with sexual content
- Experience increased sexual feelings and fantasies
- Develop crushes on friends, older teens, teachers, rock stars, etc.

- Respect their need for body privacy, but set limits on other types of privacy (i.e. computer and cell phone use must be monitored/supervised to ensure safety)
- Model healthy, intimate adult relationships and responsible use of alcohol and prescription drugs
- Talk with children about bullying and other unhealthy and abusive relationships
- Supervise and monitor tweens
- Communicate clearly and directly about family values, beliefs and traditions surrounding dating, substance misuse, and other issues of importance
- Teach children about risk of sexual activity, including physical and emotional risks; teen dating relationships are a major source of emotional distress
- Role play situations tweens will likely face in middle school such as being encouraged to smoke, drink or bully another child

Teens Ages 13-18

- Continue and complete the changes of puberty
- Peer relationships with both genders become more and more important
- Value independence and explore ways in which they are unique and different from family members
- Desire to “try on” different styles, personalities, ways of expressing themselves
- Increase in ability to control impulses
- Vary between desire for independence and need for ongoing parental help, support and stability
- Strong emotional highs and lows
- Developing confidence in social situations
- Developing ability to reason, foresee consequences of actions, questions others values and decisions
- Experience increased sexual feelings and want physical closeness with a partner

- Continue to set limits on various privacy issues, relaxing these only as older teens demonstrate increased maturity
- Consider starting regular family meetings to promote open communication about issues and concerns
- Continue to supervise and monitor teens; make sure friends’ parents know and will respect your family’s rules and limits
- Talk about family values, beliefs and traditions
- Talk about teen sexual and other high risk activities



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