

## **Child Sexual Development**

From a series Talashia Keim Yoder led at College Mennonite Church

### Session 1: Why it matters to Christians

-Summary and Excerpts from “Sexuality: God’s Gift”- ed. Anne Krabill Hershberger, chapter 4 by Jim Ritchie of Created by God.

#### Created By God

- “Each child has the right to know two interrelated truths regarding the gift of his or her birth.”
  - The miracle of your being (read para 2, pg 69)
  - Your singular contribution to the diversity of humanity (paragraphs 1 and 3)
- Sexuality is a gift.
  - Daniel’s response about theology of masturbation - God gave us nerve endings, God gave us curiosity. I’m guessing God wanted us to put those things together. And like all good gifts, they are to be used respectfully and in balance.

#### Why is it important for parents to think about this stuff?

- Whether you like to think about it or not, your children are sexual beings.
- Your children will receive a sex education. It can begin with you, or it can begin with what they hear or read elsewhere.
- If you avoid talking about sexuality or bodies, that very avoidance teaches your children - they learn that it is shameful, it’s something we don’t talk about, and that you’re not the one they should come to with questions or when bad or confusing things happen.

Mixed messages from the culture - if we aren’t talking about this stuff, if we aren’t their primary educators, how are they supposed to deal with this?

#### Getting started (from Jim Ritchie)

- “Know and grow” - learn more yourself so that you can educate your children
- “The diaper test” - both parents should change diapers, and don’t act like it’s gross.
- Language
- Talk about sexuality. Repeatedly. “What do you know about...”
- Intimacy - not synonymous with intercourse. Teach and model healthy intimacy as something that happens at every age, so that sex eventually is something that is added to intimacy, rather than a substitute for it.

## Stages of Sexual Development

**Note:** Your child is a sexual being. Respect who they are by knowing what they’re going through and responding to/guiding them appropriately. Remember, you only need to be one step ahead. You don’t have to know everything. Just be one step ahead.

**Prenatal:** In ultrasounds, babies have been observed with erections and touching their genitals. This is normal, and a reminder that we are all sexual beings from the get-go.

**Birth-18 months:** Erikson's trust v. mistrust stage.

**The work:** They are learning to trust that their body works for them, and that you can be trusted to care for them. A gentle bond of trust with a parent gives them an early concept of relationships. They are learning to be appropriately intimate through touch from caregivers.

**Behaviors:** Oral stage, exploration of their world

**What parents can do:**

- To set the stage for a later ability to form relationships and be intimate, cuddle them, hold them, do infant massage, give eye contact, be gentle.
- The oral stage is actually a very important part of sexual development. While you of course don't want them putting lots of germy things in their mouths, it is good to let them explore their world as much as possible with their mouths.
- Just as they learn that their toes are an extension of themselves, they will also discover their genitals. It is okay, in fact, good, to let them touch themselves (except when there's poop there, of course!).
- Name body parts when they discover them. "Yes, that's your toe! Thank you God for toes." "That's your vulva! Thank you God for vulvas."
- This is when many of us begin playing the "name the body part" game. Instead of stopping at the belly button and skipping to the knees, name the parts in between.
- Start teaching consent: Tell them, "I'm going to pick you up now" before you pick them up. Explain how you are caring for their body.

**18 months-3 years:** Erikson's Autonomy v. Shame and Doubt stage.

**The work:** They are learning that they have agency over their body, and they are exploring a lot! The work of this stage is to help them own and respect their own body and the bodies of others, and to learn how to do their exploring in an appropriate way.

**Behaviors:**

- Exploring and touching their own genitals, showing them off to others
- Rub their genitals (some may masturbate)
- Erections
- Love to be naked
- Try to touch mother's breast, interested in father's penis
- Ask questions about bodily functions

**What parents can do:**

- Continue to cuddle and teach healthy intimacy.

- Continue to name body parts using correct language. Make sure you don't skip the female parts (many girls think they have nothing - they should know they have a vulva!)
- Validate what they feel in a matter-of-fact way - "Yes, when you touch your penis it sometimes becomes big and hard and tickles."
- Treat potty-training matter-of-factly - don't act like it's disgusting
- Help them learn when it's appropriate to be naked (at home with family, away from open windows...)
- Help them know when it's appropriate to touch themselves - not in the living room with company, but in their room or the bathroom.
- They can start to understand the difference between public and private - private doesn't mean shameful, it means special and meant only for the child.
- Start teaching consent: When they tell you to stop tickling them, stop. Don't force them to hug or kiss someone. Teach them to ask other children before they offer a hug or other touch (most of this is modeling at this age).
- This is when ideas about gender equality begin to be formed. Demonstrate what you want them to believe.

### **3-5 ½ years: Erikson's initiative vs. guilt**

**The work:** They are curious, and have the language to ask questions. They are learning more about boundaries, establishing gender identity, and learning that they are in control of their body.

#### **Behaviors:**

- Occasional masturbation
- Role-playing ("You be the mommy, I'll be the daddy")
- Ask questions about where babies come from
- "Sex play" - wanting to look at dolls' and stuffed animals' bottoms, playing doctor, peeking under clothing of adults, playing doctor, "you show me yours and I'll show you mine."
- "I'm a girl!" or "I'm a boy!" - getting very firm in their gender identity.
- Love to be naked
- Very, very curious!!!

#### **What parents can do:**

- Continue to name body parts correctly
- Continue to help them know when and where it is appropriate to explore
- Help them learn boundaries - others shouldn't look at or touch you without your permission, and you shouldn't look at or touch others without their permission.
- Answer their questions about where babies come from simply. They can't yet understand adult relationships, so don't go into the physical or emotional aspects of having sex. Just explain how it works, and that it's for

grown-ups, not kids. Use correct language, and avoid analogies. It's sperm, not a seed.

- Let their questions guide how much and what you tell them.
- Their bodies are not things to be ashamed of. Their bodies are created good, and because of that, it is important to care for them.
- While masturbation may be super uncomfortable for the parents, it is normal and actually healthy. If your child is constantly masturbating, consider putting some limits on it - 10 minutes in your room per day, for example. But the consequences down the road of not allowing it at all are not what you want!
- "Sex play" is also normal. Find appropriate ways to let them explore and be curious.
- Teach consent. By now, they need to know that their body is their own, and they have the right to say "no" to unwanted touch.

#### Ages 5 1/2-12: Erikson's Industry vs Inferiority

The Work: Filling in their gaps of knowledge in how bodies work and what they do, growing understanding of privacy and appropriate behavior, solidification of gender identity and beginning of sexual identity, beginnings of puberty.

#### Ages 5-6 Behavior and What Parents Can Do

- Active imaginations may lead to some bizarre conclusions of how things work! It's important to continue to present accurate information to them.
- Outside influences are now more at work, creating some confusion. It is important for the parents to continue to address appropriate behavior, as well as to continue to model and articulate gender equality, etc.
- Children are starting to notice different types of family situations. Help them understand that there are lots of different family make-ups, and all of them are okay. In this stage, it is very important for them to understand that their family situation is okay, too!
- Masturbation continues. At this age, they should definitely know where and when it's appropriate. Again...it's normal and healthy.
- Sex play continues. Help them do it in a healthy way.
- May embrace their gender identity more, or may try out different ways of expressing their gender. If they identify differently from their presenting gender, this is the time when it will come out. They will need a lot of support from parents and other adults.
- They should know without question now about consent.

#### Ages 6-9 Behavior and What Parents Can Do

- Now able to grasp all the concepts of sex, conception, birth process, but they don't grasp the pleasure part of it, so they think their parents only had sex once per child conceived. That's okay, let them think it!
- Understand the complexities of being a boy or a girl. Boys, especially, begin to feel pressure to act a certain way based on their gender. Do what

you can to help them know they don't have to conform to everything expected of them. Don't use terms like, "He's all boy" or "Toughen up, you're not a girl." This not only harms your child's development, it has repercussions for the way they treat members of the opposite gender in the future. This is also the time to make sure they are exposed to non-stereotyped gender roles, particularly if your family operates in a way that's more stereotyped.

- Sex play and masturbation continue.
- They will begin to use slang for body parts, and to whisper about sexual terms and jokes. Continue to model respectful and appropriate behavior. Take some mystery out of it by setting a timer for five minutes and joining them in saying their "funny" words - but everyone has to stop when the timer goes off.
- Some girls start to go through puberty at age 8. It's important for parents to let children know about the changes that are coming. Establish now that it's an open conversation, and that you are an "askable" parent.
- They're starting to notice things that don't fit their definition of "normal."