

What Preschoolers Need To Know About Sex

Ages 2-5



Developed in partnership with Authentic Intimacy.



What should your child know about their body and the body of the opposite gender?

God created your child's body and biological sex with purpose, and it is good!

Just like an artist carefully crafts a work of art, God created your child as a masterpiece and your child is "wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). Each boy and girl is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), showing a picture to the world of who God is and having the opportunity to use their bodies for good.

What this looks like:

- When you hold your child's wiggly body in your lap, say, "God made your body and it's amazing!" so they can connect these words to their physical body.
- Ask them questions about their body like, "What does your body look like? What color is it? What shape is it?" and then reinforce, "God made that! Your body is beautiful."
- When your child talks about being a boy or girl or mentions their own genitals, say, "I'm so glad God made you a girl (or boy)! He knew just what He was doing, and He did a great job."
- While your child brushes their teeth at night, point to the mirror and say, "See how you can see the reflection of your face in the mirror? God says you're a reflection of Him!"

Preschoolers are inquisitive and unselfconscious.

At this age, kids are bursting with curiosity and love to ask questions, explore their bodies, push limits and boundaries, and discover the relationships between the people in their lives.

What this looks like:

- When your child asks questions about their body or the bodies of their family or friends, give simple and accurate answers like, “Boys have penises and girls have vulvas,” or “Mommies have breasts so they can make milk for their babies.”
- Your child might make comments about someone’s body in public. They’re not being impolite, just curious!
- Gently respond to their question or comment, seeing it as an opportunity to teach about the differences between people and to reinforce kindness. For example, “Sometimes boys have long hair. Isn’t that great?”
- You might suggest they can tell you any observations in a whisper, because some people feel uncomfortable when other people discuss their bodies.
- Your child might like to use imaginative play to explore family relationships and gender roles. Provide plenty of time for imaginative play, or even join in the fun as they dress up, play with a dollhouse, or pretend to be a mail carrier.
- Kids need your help knowing when to take clothes off vs. when to leave them on. For dress-up and otherwise, suggest kids change by themselves in a bathroom or bedroom.

Understand the basic anatomy of your child.

Knowing physical anatomy will help you both take proper care of your child and also recognize and articulate illness, injury, or abnormality. Remember that there is a wide range of normal variation among human bodies, as well as their genitalia. Consult your child’s pediatrician if you have any concerns.

What this looks like:

- Study simple diagrams of your child’s biological sex, as well as the anatomy of the opposite gender.

- Make a list of any questions you have and take them to your child's doctor appointment. Give yourself permission to ask the pediatrician every question on the list. Again, don't be shy. This good practice will both help you be a better caregiver and also one day teach your child to be proactive about their own health without embarrassment.

What terms and vocabulary to use with your child:

Sexual body parts are God's creation—as normal and natural as eyes and elbows—and as such, should be treated with respect. We want our kids to know that every part of their bodies is good, holy, and filled with purpose—not silly, shameful, or gross (1 Corinthians 12:22–24).

Knowing and saying correct anatomical names—perhaps during bathing or toileting—lets your child know you can be trusted to give accurate information and are a safe place to have conversations about sex. It also protects your child from sexual predators, who often exploit children's vague ideas about their own bodies and sexuality.

Kristen Miele, curriculum author of *SexEd Reclaimed*, recommends parents review when is a good time to use those words (at home, with family, during medical care). Remind your child that other kids might not know these terms yet, so we don't shout these out or talk about them unnecessarily.

Depending on your own history, it may help to say proper anatomical terms aloud to yourself first in order to familiarize the sound of them.

- Penis.
- Scrotum: in boys, the sac of skin that contains testicles.
- Vulva: the outside of a girl's genitals, with two larger "lips," or labia majora, and underneath, a second set of smaller lips, the labia minora. These lips protect the urethra (where urine comes out) and the opening of the vagina. (Using the term "vulva" with your child will be sufficient.)
- Breasts.
- Nipples.



5 Important Conversations with Your Preschooler

1. How you talk to your child about sexuality is just as important as what you talk about.

At this formative age, you are laying the foundation of your child's understanding and feelings about sexuality. A shame-free atmosphere for exploring and understanding their own body and experience of being a boy or girl is an incredible gift to give your child.

- Consider using these **key relational messages** during your conversations about sexuality:

You can trust me.

God's design and boundaries are perfect. He loves us, and we can trust Him and His ways.

Your questions matter. Stay curious! And let's keep talking.

You can talk to me about anything.

I will always tell you the truth.

Your body is worth taking care of because you are so valuable.

Your body does not always get to be in charge, but it is always worth listening to!

I will love you no matter what.

You are not more or less valuable because of what you do. God is eager to forgive us, and we heal better as a team.

What this looks like:

- Respond to your child's sexual age-appropriate behavior (like exploring body parts or touching themselves sexually) or questions in a gentle and straightforward way. This assures your child that they don't have to be embarrassed by their sexuality in front of you. Sexually abused children may display sexual behavior or interest beyond what's age appropriate, so if you're unsure about your child's behavior, don't hesitate to talk with their pediatrician.
- You might feel nervous, uncomfortable, and even embarrassed by questions your child has or things that they do. When this happens, take a deep breath and become curious about your own feelings. Parenthood can trigger wounds and questions from our own childhood—and in that, also be an invitation to healing or corrected thinking. Don't be surprised if this happens.

Teaching your child about sexuality is an ongoing conversation.

Think of teaching your child about sexuality as an ongoing, worldview-building conversation that you will have with them throughout their childhood. Instead of "The Talk," initiate and respond to hundreds of short, organic, and relational conversations with your child. Over time, all of these small conversations will do more good than any one single conversation ever could.

What this looks like:

- Find "teachable moments" during your daily life. Sometimes you'll have something specific you want to teach about sex or relationships, sometimes your child will ask a question, sometimes you'll see something in nature that will spark a conversation.

2. Talk about the goodness of how God created our bodies and gender.

The first "sex talk" you ever have with your child can be as simple as telling them that they are made by God and it's good that they're a boy or girl! Say things like, "God made girls and God made boys," "God loves you and you make Him so happy," "God made you and everything God makes is good," and "You belong to God." All of these concepts are helpful and age-appropriate ways of teaching about the goodness of God's plan for sexuality.

What this looks like:

- As mentioned on the previous page, help your child connect these truths to their physical body by giving lots of positive physical affection. Saying, “God loves you and thinks you’re wonderful,” means so much more when you’re giving them a smile and a big hug. Or saying, “It’s so good that you’re a boy (or girl),” during bath time will reinforce the goodness of their gendered body.
- *Heaven in Your Home Family Music* by Francie Winslow and Kathryn Brunner is an excellent resource, using Scripture and simple lyrics to lay the groundwork for understanding God’s good plan for sexuality.

3. Introduce your child to the idea of “covenant love” with the use of a good storybook Bible.

God’s plan for sexuality is to give the world a picture of His faithful, sacrificial, joyful love for us. This rich and nuanced understanding of sexuality isn’t found in any single verse in the Bible, but rather in the **overarching narrative** of God’s plan of salvation.

Understanding God’s covenant love—which Sally Lloyd Jones calls “His never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love”—will help form your child’s identity as a deeply loved child of God and lay the foundation for why sexuality is so special and powerful.

What this looks like:

- Choose a storybook Bible that tells this story well, such as *The Jesus Storybook Bible* by Sally Lloyd Jones.
- *God’s Signpost* by Sam Allberry is a delightful picture book that specifically highlights the purpose of marriage to point us to God’s love.
- Establish a consistent routine, such as every night before bed or every Sunday morning. As you read these books with your child, over and over, this **divine love story** will begin to take root.

**never
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4. Teach healthy boundaries by talking to your child about privacy and consent.

Bodies are good and not something to be ashamed of, but not all contexts are safe nor appropriate for nakedness.

Teaching your child that “naked is private” instills two important values. First, it protects them from sexual predators and will serve as an internal warning if exposed to porn, while also showing them what it means to honor and safeguard their own sexuality. Second, nakedness is not only permitted, but good in the safety and security of appropriate relationships.

What this looks like:

- Show that it’s appropriate for a parent to help a young child bathe in the privacy of a bathroom, or for a pediatrician to examine a child in the privacy of an examination room.
- Teach your child to always have private parts covered in public by saying something like, “Your body is precious, and we protect it.”
- Talk about good surprises and secrets...and bad surprises and secrets. Play games of “What if?” with your child to review boundaries about happy surprises or secrets (like a Christmas gift or a birthday party), or bad or scary secrets (someone hurt you or someone else. Someone touched ____).
- Inform kids they shouldn’t see other people naked or be shown pictures of that—ever. **They need to tell you immediately** if someone shows them these things. No one should take images of them naked. Private parts are private.

To teach basic boundaries of consent—and the need for your child to give specific permission for someone to touch their bodies—allow your child to say “no” to unwanted, uncomfortable, or painful physical contact. Giving your child a chance to role-play saying “no” in a safe context will make it easier for them to do so when they encounter it in uncomfortable, inappropriate, or unsafe scenarios later in life.

This principle is helpful in stepfamily, babysitting, daycare, or foster-family contexts, too.

What this looks like:

- If Dad is tickling too much, if Mom is combing hair in a way that is painful, or if Grandma comes in for a sloppy kiss, your child knows they can say, “Please stop!” or “I don’t like that,” and will be respected.
- You may need to help relatives understand your reasoning for reinforcing consent if they’re offended when a child resists: “We’re trying to teach them healthy boundaries about affection that doesn’t feel right to them. So this is actually a good thing. Hope you can understand.”
- You could even create a small game about consent. “Let’s see... can [relative’s name] touch your private parts without permission?” (Child: “No!”) “Hmm. Can [insert teacher’s name] touch your private parts without permission?” (Child: “No!”)

5. Talk to your child about the importance of proper hygiene and self-care.

As you begin to teach your child basic hygiene and self-care, you are showing your child that their body is one of God’s greatest gifts and is worthy of great care. When you teach your child how to take care of their own body, they will develop a sense of agency, grow in confidence, and view their body as a good gift from God.



What this looks like:

- Give them vocabulary so that they can tell you when their bottom is sore or if their private parts are itchy.
- Show your child how to clean and care regularly for their own genitals. Have diaper rash cream on hand to soothe sore spots.
- If your child has a doctor’s appointment, give them the opportunity to talk to the pediatrician for themselves and use their own words to explain what is wrong.



What you might be curious about:

You and your child's questions on this topic can be endless, but we wanted to bring up a few we've heard often. Short paragraphs likely aren't enough. Still, we hope to offer some perspective to get you started.

Is it normal for my preschooler to touch themselves sexually for comfort or curiosity [masturbate]?

Yes. As toddlers explore their bodies and figure out all that their bodies can do, crawling, walking, and talking aren't the only things they will discover. Many toddlers may touch their genitals as a form of exploration, but once they discover the pleasant sensations there, this can also become a form of self-soothing.

If you notice this happening in public, gently and calmly distract or redirect your child to a different activity. Later, you could find a quiet moment to talk about how some parts of our bodies are private and shouldn't be touched in public or by other people. If you notice your child masturbating at bedtime or bathtime, it may be best to ignore it at this stage of development or even to say something like, "I know it feels good to touch and explore different parts of our body."

Even at a young age, it can be helpful for your child to make the connection between emotions and our bodies. Saying something like, "I know touching your body might help you feel calm," helps your child begin to recognize the link between emotions and physical sensations.

And while genital touching is a normal way of self-soothing for toddlers and preschoolers, you also want to teach your child more constructive ways of dealing with bodily tension or stress like having a transitional object (special blanket or stuffed animal), music, or snuggling with a caregiver.

Is it okay to use euphemisms such as "wee-wee," "privates," "front-bottom," etc?

Using correct anatomical names is an important part of teaching your child about sexuality—that it's not silly, that they can be taken seriously (rather than laughed at), that they can feel confident in how they talk about their own bodies.

However, you may find that some euphemisms are simpler or more age-appropriate at certain stages. Even if you opt to use these more simplified terms, take the time to teach

the anatomical proper names to your child, which will give dignity to their body parts and the conversations you have about them.

Is it normal for my child to want to dress or pretend to be the opposite gender?

Your child is curiously exploring the relationships and people in their world.

Your child is asking, “What does it mean to be a girl?” “What does it mean to be a boy?” In essence, they are playing with gender, recognizing what it looks and feels like, and experimenting with its limits.

If this happens, it will give you opportunities to talk about the general characteristics, differences and goodness of each gender—how wonderful it is that God made girls and God made boys.

Consider using words like “a lot of times...but not always” when you talk about traditional gender roles, so your child knows that—for example—girls, too, can feel aggressive or be good leaders or climb trees or like sports. Boys can be emotionally sensitive or play with dolls or or like the color pink or like to care for their appearance. (Similarly, using “you might someday” when talking about marriage or having babies can protect our kids’ sense of worth if in the future God calls them to singleness, or they experience infertility.) Flexibility in our stereotypes communicates that if your child’s personality doesn’t follow those stereotypes, God’s unique creation of their biological sex is still perfect and on purpose.

As children get into the elementary years, they settle into their own gender and gender-experimental play generally fades away.

How should I deal with “potty language” and jokes?

At this age, many kids think that potty jokes are absolutely hysterical. Just the mention of the word “poop” can send them rolling on the floor with giggles. The truth is, passing gas is funny and poop does look gross!

Let your child enjoy the strangeness and wonder of the human body, while also helping them understand socially appropriate times and places for these jokes. But there may be times when these jokes slip into crudeness or shaming language (ie. shoving your bottom in someone’s face or making fun of someone else’s smelly toots).

Again, these are wonderful opportunities to point out that all people's bodies are good and our own bodies should be used to show God's love to each other. Gently and firmly redirect your child and help them develop a sense of humor that is never at the expense of another person.



What your child might be curious about:

Why does my penis get big?

Your preschooler may be incredibly curious and fascinated by an erection. He may ask you a question about it or just show it to you. This is a great opportunity to say something like, "Wow! Isn't your body amazing? It's so cool how God made boys." Answer any questions as simply and accurately as possible, such as, "God made your penis to be like a sponge that is soft sometimes but gets harder when it fills up with blood."

Why do bodies look different?

Your child will ask a million questions about the differences between bodies. Why do girls have vulvas and boys have penises? Why do boys' and girls' nipples look the same, but men's and women's breasts look different? Why is my penis small, but daddy's penis is big?

This may be a great time to reinforce that God loves every kind of person, and made girls and boys different on purpose—a key principle to build on for God's design of marriage. We see this in the creation narrative as God made dark and light, land and sea.

Children may also want to compare their bodies and genitalia with that of their friends. If your child shows their genitalia to a friend or vice versa, don't be overly alarmed. This usually comes from a natural curiosity.

Encourage your child to talk to you about the experience, in case he needs to process any anxiety, discomfort, or questions, and then gently reinforce that "naked is private."

Why are those two dragonflies connected?

Your child will love being in nature and will be curious about everything they see! Welcome these opportunities to answer questions about mating and reproduction in nature, which is a great way to begin conversations about sex.

You may even intentionally plant some seeds together, examine the parts of a flower, or use eggs while baking in order to talk about all the different forms of reproduction in nature. If they ask questions about how babies are born, answer in the same open, matter-of-fact way you might answer any questions about the natural world.

A lack of stigma now means more open communication to come, and less of a chance that your child will consult Google or a friend when they have questions about sexuality.