



So you want to know more about...

Masturbation

Is it normal?

Of course it is! But that's easier said than believed. While adults don't want children to be ashamed or embarrassed by their bodies and exploration of them, it's easy to be embarrassed on their behalf. We attach our adult morals to their behavior, which is neither appropriate nor helpful.

Children explore their bodies as a matter of course, starting when they are very young. Their tiny fingers investigate unexpected nooks, crannies, and appendages. They discover by chance that touching certain spots feels good and they may reach for those areas whenever they can. When you open their diapers, for example, they may try to put toys in their diapers or rub against them. This is all very normal. If adults become alarmed at the behavior, as with any extreme reaction, it will only reinforce the

"undesirable" behavior. So stay cool. Just wash their hands after the change and move on.

Toddlers and preschoolers will typically touch or rub themselves to relax before they go to sleep. Toilet learning provides a chance for more exploration or "potty" talk. By staying matter of fact in these situations, you neither reinforce the behavior nor project feelings of shame onto the child.

Sometimes preschool and kindergarten children may touch themselves in more "public" places (their nap mat feels private to them) such as the playground, the classroom, or in the great outdoors. They may be stressed, bored, or looking for a reaction. When 3 and 4 year- old children are masturbating in public, adults need to set firm limits. "That's

something we do in private. Let's wash your hands and find something to do."

It's up to adults to help children understand about privacy and limits. School-age children who masturbate in public (and this includes public areas of your home) need extra help understanding that it is neither hygienic nor sociable to masturbate around other people. A consultation with your pediatrician or a psychologist might be in order. They will want to know how often and in what contexts the behavior is occurring, and whether it interferes with other activities.

Talking About Privacy

It's never too early to use appropriate words to label body parts and discuss privacy. Conversations about "private parts" can help children understand the difference between good and bad touches. Let children know it is okay for caregivers to touch their private parts to clean them. Explain what you're doing when you clean your child's body, so they will know what appropriate cleaning looks and feels like.

If your child tries to explore your body, don't overreact, but set limits. Say, "Honey, that's a private part of my body, hands off." When is it time for opposite sex children to stop seeing a parent naked? It usually happens between 4-7 years of age. When children begin to show increased interest, make embarrassed remarks, or try to touch private parts, it's time. If children can't understand the concept of your privacy, they won't be able to "protect" their own or know to tell you if their privacy is ever violated.

Further reading

- *A Bargain for Frances*, by Russell Hoban
- *Junie B. Jones and the Sneaky Peeky Spying*, by Barbara Parks

Playing Doctor

You left 4 year-old Joey and Jenny playing in Jenny's bedroom as usual and checked in to find them naked and playing doctor! What to do? If you overreact, you can cast shame on perfectly normal curiosity and/or create more intrigue. Kids may wonder: "Why is this so bad? Maybe there's something we haven't discovered yet!"

Just as children investigate their own bodies, they often try to explore other children's, too. They want to know if everyone has the same equipment and how other equipment looks or works. When you find children playing doctor, your first step should be to reiterate the concept of "privacy." Stress that even when both children are willing to participate, it is not appropriate. Their curiosity is your cue to provide

more information, privately and at their own speed. Let the other child's parents know so that they can also address the issue.

When is "playing doctor" **not** okay? It shouldn't happen repeatedly. Children may try more than once, but it should not be an ongoing behavior. If one child is extremely distressed about the situation, they may have been coerced or otherwise trespassed upon. Teach all children to loudly say "NO!" and "STOP!" if someone touches their private parts or touches them in any way that makes them uncomfortable. Passivity in this type of situation is a real concern. In addition, children who frequently sexualize behavior or imitate adult sexuality *may* be victims of abuse, see below.

Sexual Abuse

Masturbation is normal, but excessive masturbation in conjunction with the following behaviors can be an indicator of sexual abuse or other extreme emotional duress and should be evaluated by a professional:

- Sudden behavioral/dispositional changes;
- Extreme mood swings, or tantrums in older children;
- Withdrawal from favorite activities;
- Unexplained genital rashes or bruises;

- Unusual discharge in girls and boys;
- Refusal to bathe;
- Sexual acting out with other children;
- Sudden changes in eating or sleep.

Children may be afraid or even unable to articulate what has happened to them, so these indicators should be taken very seriously.

Frequently Asked Questions

How much is "too much?" This is hard to quantify. When children masturbate to the exclusion of other activities, or withdraw from activities they would normally enjoy, it is too much. If older (3 yrs. and up) children do it in public, it is also too much. Check with your pediatrician for further guidelines.

I don't want my child to masturbate, and I want you to stop her when she does it at the center. We afford children privacy during naptime and do not interfere with typical self-soothing behavior. If other children are noticing and beginning to tease, we will address it. But we don't believe it is wrong and won't say so.

I feel bad asking my child to wash his hands after touching himself because I don't want him to think it's dirty. Washing hands after diapering does not send the message that toileting is bad. Hand washing after going to the bathroom should *already* be an expectation and not become an issue at this point.

What do you do if you suspect sexual abuse? We are obligated by law to report our suspicions to the authorities so they may investigate. This is not a decision we undertake lightly, but our biggest priority is keeping children safe.